

Engage: A Generous Heart

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Exodus 35 and 36, select verses

In September 2000, something miraculous happened in southwest Georgia. Sumter County, the home of the town of Americus, the birthplace of Habitat for Humanity, declared victory over substandard housing. Thanks to the hard work of thousands of people, and the collaboration of several nonprofit groups and government agencies over the course of ten years or so, by September of 2000, every resident of Sumter County had access to decent, affordable housing.

It was a miracle. For all intents and purposes, substandard housing was eradicated in an entire county. This is not to say that no one remained in inadequate lodging- for a variety of reasons, there were individuals who chose not to avail themselves of the options offered to them. However, Habitat for Humanity and its partner agencies worked diligently to assure that the basic human right of decent affordable housing was made available to everyone within that county.

It is the stated goal of Habitat for Humanity to eliminate substandard housing worldwide. That's a lofty goal, and solving the problem in one county in one country might seem like a drop in a very large bucket. But as you well know, the only way any bucket gets filled is a drop at a time.

The story of Sumter County is an inspiration to anyone working toward a goal. It is a reminder that anything is possible. It is a modern-day example of the kind of faithful stewardship we read about in this morning's scripture lesson.

When your pastors sat down to plan this fall's worship, as we do every couple of months or so, we had the kind of conversation pastors love, and some of you might consider akin to watching paint dry. Anticipating Stewardship season, we began discussing scriptural texts that speak to giving, and generosity, and talents. Because this is a unique time of year, we have departed from the Revised Common Lectionary, our scriptural guide through much of the year. With an eye toward our Stewardship theme, Engage, we discussed a number of passages, some of which you have heard in the past few weeks.

At one point, Chuck piped in and said, "you know what passage I would love to hear a stewardship sermon on? Exodus 35 and 36." We all flipped through our Bibles (I don't know about my other colleagues, but at that moment I couldn't have told you what was in Exodus 35 and 36) and read the passage. What I just read. Yeah.

It must have been Chuck's enthusiasm- if you've spent even a little bit of time with him, you know how contagious his enthusiasm can be- I am sure that he could convince a zebra that it had spots and not stripes – and so I agreed to take on this text. And here we are.

I don't know if it will surprise you or not, but there's not a lot of scholarship out there about these two chapters in Exodus. As far as I can tell, no one's written a book on them, and the folks who have written on Exodus as a whole have given only passing mention to this particular story. Unless you've been in a very detailed bible study on Exodus, chances are, you haven't heard much about this passage. It certainly isn't in the Lectionary.

And I find that sad. Because this story is a miracle story. It is not every day that we hear it said that people brought “more than enough” to meet a need.

But here it is, in black and white- Moses went to the Israelites as he had done countless times before, to deliver a command from the Lord. Remember, this is the same Moses who had earlier complained to the Lord that he was ineloquent and slow of speech. But here he is, delivering what might be the shortest, most effective stewardship sermon in history. He gathered the people, presented the need, and called for their response.

When you read the whole story, you learn that he called all of the people of the community- men and women- to bring whatever they had, ranging from gold and silver to linen and leather, gemstones, oils, and spices. Everything was needed, and everyone was called on to help. And boy, did they respond.

The text describes the response of the people like this: “they came, everyone whose heart was stirred, and everyone whose spirit was willing.” With stirred hearts and willing spirits, the people poured forth, bringing their freewill offerings to the Lord.

They brought so much, we read, that the chief artisans, Bezalel and Oholiab (I really think Chuck wanted to hear this scripture just to hear someone say those names) came back to Moses and said, “enough!” The people had brought far more than was needed to do the work that was set before them. It doesn't say it explicitly in the text, but there is no doubt in my mind that this is a miracle.

What would it take, do you think, for us to live in a world in which a story like this wouldn't be considered miraculous, but rather would be an everyday occurrence? What would it look like to live in a world in which each and every need were met with “more than enough”? Can you even imagine it?

I once heard a director of a nonprofit agency say that their goal was to put themselves out of business, and though it may sound crazy, I think that is spot on. Whether working to alleviate poverty or end homelessness, eradicate disease or illiteracy or violence, any group working toward a cause ought to have at its core a desire that somehow, some day, people would bring, or

do, or provide more than enough to solve the problem that they are trying to address. And any of us giving money to such agencies ought to hope that they would operate with that exact motivation.

But we can't say that about the church. As the Body of Christ, we didn't call ourselves into being, and we certainly are not trying to put ourselves out of business. It isn't up to us to decide when, or if, our work as disciples is finished. That is up to God. And so we could say that there will never be a time when "more than enough" is brought in offering to God.

In fact, it works in exactly the opposite way. As the Book of Order of the PC(USA) states in its opening chapter, "The church is the body of Christ. Christ gives to the Church all the gifts necessary to be his body." In return, the church is called to demonstrate these gifts in the world by being a community of faith, hope, love and witness.¹

God has given us more than enough to be temples of his presence, and vessels of his grace. This life is ours because of God's boundless love for us and so everything we do ought to be a reflection of our gratitude. It is not we who give more than enough, but God who does.

When all that we have to offer is ours because of God, there's no way we could ever give too much in response. We might be able to give enough to meet a certain need, say a new building or a new program, new choir robes or camp scholarships. But each of these things is a part of the whole of ministry, and so even when one initiative is fully funded, the work we are called to do is not finished.

This is stewardship. And it is unlike any other charitable giving we do. You see, stewardship is not the raising of funds to meet a particular need. That is crucial, and a part of our stewardship goes toward the fundraising efforts of some very important groups locally, nationally, and worldwide.

But when we give to the church, we are never giving to one single ministry. My passion might be supporting those in need in Haiti, and my pledge dollars go to support that ministry, but they also go to paying the salaries of those who make sure that rooms are setup for meetings and people are greeted warmly when they come onto our campus.

I may have a great interest in adult Christian formation, and be pleased that my pledge goes to ensure that this church offers a variety of classes and Bible studies, but it's important that I know that money also goes to ensure that our church vans are maintained and equipped to carry young people to camp, and to Wednesday Connect, and to transport Prime Timers on trips which enhance their fellowship and spiritual growth.

I might believe that the single most important use of my pledge money is for worship, and be happy that what I give makes sure that we have educated clergy and beautiful music, a clean

¹ F-1.0301

sanctuary and well-trained deacons and ushers, but I need to be aware that my money also goes toward providing a safe place for youth to explore their faith with one another and with compassionate and qualified adult advisors, as well as opportunities for young children to learn about God's love through education and play in a safe and caring environment.

Even if I am convinced that our greatest call as a church is to feed the hungry and house the homeless, and be gratified that much of my pledge goes to support the very good work being done by wonderful agencies in our community, it is vital that I know that my money also helps to train and equip Stephen Ministers to walk alongside my brothers and sisters facing grief, hopelessness, and transition in their seemingly stable lives.

When we give to the church, we are not giving to a cause, or an interest group. We are giving to God's ongoing mission in this world, and that mission is not ours to control or direct or predict. It is wide-ranging and inclusive, taking on more forms than any of us can possibly know.

It is about worship and mission, formation and care. It is about food and shelter, fellowship and compassion. It is for young and old, rich and poor, wise and foolish. It addresses the tangible and the intangible needs that exist in all of our lives.

Moses' call to the people of Israel to bring what they had for the building of God's tabernacle may well have been the first ever stewardship campaign. In order for the people of Israel to move forward in their mission to follow God and spread God's word throughout the world, a tabernacle needed to be built.

And so the people responded. With generous hearts, they brought what they had, until the coffers were overflowing and the needs were met.

We might think that this story has little practical use for us today, sitting in this big, beautiful sanctuary, and we would certainly be confused if people walked down the center aisle carrying bolts of linen, jars of oil and bags of spices. But when we really think about it, not much has changed from then til now.

Like the people of Israel, God has given us life and called us to follow him. He has watched over us in hard times and walked beside us in good times. He has called us to be a community of brothers and sisters, helping, teaching, and caring for one another.

Like all who came before us, and all who will follow, God has given us more than we can ever imagine, more than we can ever deserve.

And if you don't quite know what to do with all of that, in your head or in your heart, take comfort. For with willing hearts and willing spirits, our forerunners in the faith have paved the way, showing us how we are both called and also privileged to respond to God's grace-filled command.

May our hearts be ever generous. In the name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.