

Stop Giving! (We Have More Than Enough)

Sermon 121 | Greystone Baptist Church | November 21, 2021

Exodus 36:1-7

A holy man walked down from his hermitage into the city nearby to shop for some necessary supplies. On his way home a stranger approached him and asked for a stone. It was a strange request for sure, so the holy man asked the stranger why he would ask for such a thing. The stranger replied, “Last night I had a dream that a holy man would come down into the city, and that he would give me a precious stone. So when I saw you, I ran after you to see if it might be true.” Upon hearing the story, the holy man reached into his bag and found a stone. As the stone passed from the hands of the holy man to those of the stranger, the stranger realized this was not just any precious stone, this was an unimaginable gift, a nearly perfect diamond.

The holy man had turned and begun making his way up the mountain to the hermitage before the stranger made sense of all that had happened. Bewildered and surprised, the stranger returned to his home in the city. But that night he couldn’t sleep. He tossed and turned, perplexed by the holy man and his generous gift. The man rose early in the city, before dawn, and hiked up to the holy man’s hermitage. Knocking on the door as the sun rose, the holy man greeted him and welcomed him in. The stranger handed the diamond back to the holy man and asked a new question. This time, rather than asking for a stone, he said, “Can you now give me the wealth that allowed for you to give this precious diamond away so easily?”¹

Oh that God would give us the wealth that would allow us to give so easily.

After the incident with the golden calf, when the people broke their covenant with God in the wilderness, God called Moses back up to the mountain to renew their relationship and to reinscribe the law upon tablets for the people. This is where we get the ten commandments. These new commands from God transformed the people, offering them a new way of life. One that moved them from Pharaoh’s economy to God’s economy, Pharaoh’s kingdom to God’s kingdom. In Pharaoh’s world – the one Israel had just fled – there was never enough, life was spent building and storing up personal wealth. This led to greed and the exploitation of Hebrew labor. But in God’s realm – the one described in the 10 commandments – there is more than enough, because everyone lives together as neighbors, with goods and power focused on the community. God is leading Israel through the wilderness of transformation from scarcity to abundance, from consumerism to community, from captivity to promise.

The commandments, then, are not “rules for deep moralism. They are not commonsense rules designed to clobber and scold people. Rather they are the most elemental statement of how to organize social power and social goods for the common benefit of the community. They are indeed ‘a new commandment’ that is quite in contrast to the old

¹ John Claypool, retrieved from colleague Jake Maxwell. Sermon Illustration Sheet 2

commandments of Pharaoh."² In these new commandments, Israel learns that God is to be loved, served, and trusted above all security found in Pharaoh's system. There is no turning back to the bread of Egypt, now they will live on daily manna. They learn that family, friends, and neighbors are to be respected and protected, not exploited for selfish gain. They learn that there is a limit to what one needs to acquire, in Pharaoh's world there was a constant push for more, more, more. More bricks, more control, more territory, more oil, more power... but this spirit of unending acquisition is better suited for an empire than a neighborhood. And God's dreams favored the neighborhood. This point is underscored by the last lesson that Israel learned in their new covenant with God. The Sabbath. This practice of rest stood in stark contrast to the unceasing rhythm of work and production that they knew in Pharaoh's world. God is a God who cares for the community more than what they can produce, and so God insists on rest, for the sake of God's own people.

What would it take to acquire the wealth to give so freely?

It appears it would take a complete re-orientation. A transformation from Pharaoh's empire to God's neighborhood.³

When Moses came back down, he shared the good news with all the people, the news that God still wished to dwell among them, to move into the neighborhood so to speak. So they began building the Tabernacle – the house of God. This would be the place where God could live and dwell among them. It was an incredible undertaking, especially for a nomadic people, a community that had literally just been freed from slavery, escaping Pharaoh by passing through the Red Sea with little more than the clothes on their backs, a people who were just now on the brink of their own transformation from scarcity to abundance. Here they were, sharing everything in order to build a house for God to live among them.

The Tabernacle would take on different forms as time went on. First a tent, one that looked like a canopy and could easily move with the people as they traveled from one place to the next. This would be the place where Israel communed with God during their three-hundred year wilderness journey. Over time the people embellished the structure, bringing their finest supplies and skills to dedicate to the task. Wood workers, weavers, seamstresses, and designers, all working together to create and improve a structure that was worthy of the ongoing covenant they shared with God.

I will be your God, and you will be my people.

It is impressive enough that an entire nation of people, on the heels of their own liberation, getting their first taste of freedom, would work together and offering all that they had to serve one common purpose – building the Tabernacle. What is even more impressive, though, is that they had no idea what their future would hold.

² Bruggemann, 23.

³ *ibid.* pp. 23-25

How could they embrace such generosity?

They didn't know how long things would be the way they were. They didn't know if their investment would be short term or long term (I believe they ended up in the wilderness for 300 years!). And they didn't know where God and Moses were leading them in the end. All they knew is that they had signed up to be in *community* with one another, and in *relationship* with God. And for all of those relationships to thrive, they needed a place for their God to call home.

The Tabernacle would be that place. A meeting place where God and God's people could commune. A sanctuary where God's spirit could restore the broken and the weary. A home, a dwelling place, for a God who desired to be *with* the people, a God who wanted to live in the neighborhood.

Like the holy man who, freely and without any time for deliberation, gave away his precious diamond, the Israelites brought what they had to Tabernacle. They gave, and gave, and gave until Moses had to tell them: "Stop! We have more than enough!"

Oh that we could have the wealth to give so freely!

What would it take, I wonder?

First, I think we'd need to ask for God's wisdom, so that we might remember that everything we have already belongs to God. Our gifts, our talents, our resources are not ours to hoard and save up for ourselves. No, they belong to God and they are entrusted to us so that we might share them wisely, investing in the things that build up the church, which is our wilderness Tabernacle. When we understand that what we have is not only ours, but that it is ours to share with God and with our neighbors, we can more freely give – especially to the places, the organizations, and the relationships that matter most – not to us, but to God.

Next, we can learn a little something from the dreamers, the designers, and the builders of the Tabernacle. Those who caught an early glimpse of God's vision for a home in the wilderness, one that would not be planted in one place, unchanging, and unmoving over time. Rather, a home for God who desired relationship with God's people over anything else. A home for a God who wanted to be *with* those people, as they journeyed, as they grew, as they experienced doubt, and even as they passed away. *The Tabernacle was there throughout all of it.* It outlasted generations of Israelites as they came and went, but the Tabernacle remained the sanctuary, the dwelling place, the meeting place for God and God's people.

And if we are to learn from those who gave so much to build such a place, then we might remember our own founders, those whose labors built this sanctuary, those whose dreams envisioned the plans and the design, those whose hearts were all in no matter the cost, no matter the commitment – many times recognizing – no – *hoping* – that this place, this

Tabernacle would out last them. In faith, they along with so many others who came before us gave their talents, their time, and their resources to ensure that there was a dwelling place for God here in North Raleigh. They gave in order to make sure that this neighborhood had a sanctuary where we could come and commune with God.

Finally, we need to ask God to renew the covenant with us. Like the Israelites who were tasting freedom as they walked into the wilderness, we too experience freedom in our own wildernesses. Freedom to choose isolation over community, consumerism over concern for our neighbors, freedom to choose the gods of scarcity and materialism over the God of abundance. But if we desire the wealth that allows us to freely give it all away, the we have to allow God to transform our minds, our souls, our bodies, and yes even our wallets from the land of Egypt to the land of Promise.

In so doing, we recognize the calling and accept the invitation to bring what we have: our gifts, our talents, our time, and our resources to continue building, to continue creating – with God – not a church that exists only for ourselves, but a church that is designed with our neighbors in mind. A church that sees their needs, feels their pain, identifies with their struggles, and welcomes them with open arms. We are building a home for God to live and dwell in *this* neighborhood.

That means we have to set aside our own personal preferences and ideas. It means we have to release our offerings, letting go of our desire to control the outcomes, and trusting God to lead us.

In the words of Wendell Berry, we need to:

Ask the questions that have no answers
... [we need to] Plant sequoias.
Say[ing] that [our] main crop is the forest
that [we] did not plant,
that [we] will not live to harvest.

Because when we are transformed from scarcity to abundance, when journey from Pharaoh's economy to God's neighborhood, we begin to catch a glimpse of a story that is so much bigger than ourselves, we cannot help but respond with generosity. Generosity that enables us to bring all that we have to the house of God, the center of life in God's neighborhood, the place where we are transformed and called to give so that in God's unique abundance, *all* might come and know the joy of God's neighborhood.

If we could all acquire the wealth to give so freely... maybe one day our stewardship campaign slogan could be "Stop Giving! We have more than enough!"