

“Cheerful Givers”

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2 Corinthians 9:6-9 (NRSVUE)

⁶The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not regretfully or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. ⁹As it is written,

“He scatters abroad; he gives to the poor;
his righteousness endures forever.”

Before addressing our topic for today, I’d like to take a moment to acknowledge the difficulty of the time we are living in. I try to keep up with what is going on in the world – partly because I like to be informed, but also because, as a faith leader, it is important for me to be able to speak theologically about what is going on around us, not just conceptually. But I’m finding that rather taxing right now. Much of what is happening in the world, especially when it comes to politics, is disheartening. I am keenly aware that following too closely does damage to my soul. I don’t know about you, but I am struggling to find the balance between staying informed and practicing good self-care. So, before anything else today, I want to invite us to pause, to exhale, and to acknowledge the pain of this time. It’s okay not to be okay.

I wish I could offer some sage advice about finding balance. I’m still trying to figure it out. My strongest impulses in this time are either to be constantly outraged or to withdraw and hope somehow it all resolves without my involvement. Of course, neither of those are really viable options. I don’t know the answer. I don’t think there is a simple answer. The way out is the way through. We live in this moment in time, whether we asked for it or not.

We cannot shield ourselves from the world, but we can remember to take stock of our blessings. Yes, even in a time of great turmoil, we are blessed. I spent a little time this week making a short list of some of my blessings, and I’d like to share it with you.

I have a wonderful and loving family. We live in a comfortable home in a great neighborhood. I am blessed with relatively good health. I have a wonky knee, I’m about 20 pounds overweight, and my cholesterol is too high. But I don’t take it for granted that I am as healthy as I am, and I have the ability to make changes. I get to do meaningful work that helps people encounter hope and that affords me and my family a good standard of living. I have a faith that keeps me grounded and living with purpose, and that faith teaches me to be more loving and inclusive of all people.

I invite you to make your own list. Think of all the ways God blesses you and give thanks for them. Now, will counting your blessings keep you from being dismayed by the chaos all around you? No. But it might adjust your perspective and remind you that, no matter how bad things get, you are still incredibly blessed.

Friends, we serve a generous God. Just make a point to notice the amazing world all around us. Everything that we have, everything that is, every moment of life is a gift from God. Then realize that God trusts *us* to care for the world God created. In the first chapter of Genesis, after God finishes the work of creation, God says to the first humans: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and nurture it. Take responsibility for the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Genesis 1:28, translation mine).

If God has given us responsibility to cultivate and care for the world, and if everything that exists is a gift from God, how should we respond? There is a churchy word for this, though it is not exclusively a religious word. That word is *stewardship*. A steward is someone who exercises care, responsibility, and administration over an estate or property. Historically, stewards were entrusted with managing the owner’s property, to preserve it and nurture its growth, and to ensure its responsible use. Stewardship simply means “to be a good steward.”

We are God’s stewards. Stewardship begins with an understanding that not only is everything a gift from God, but that ultimately everything that exists *belongs* to God. Psalm 24:1 says, “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.” In a way, everything that we have is *on loan* from God. God entrusts us with the responsibility to be good stewards of the world and everything in it.

What does good stewardship look like? When it comes to the natural world, we should protect waterways so that they can sustain life and continue to flow unimpeded to the places and people that rely on them. We should evaluate our own consumption so that we do not use more water, energy, or food than necessary. We should be careful what we throw away and what becomes of it when we do. We should preserve life in all its forms, striving so that no more species face extinction from poaching or destruction of their habitats. We should support responsible manufacturing that doesn’t release harmful chemicals and tons of carbon that choke our atmosphere. Socially, we use our voices to speak up for the voiceless, advocating for fair and equitable access to resources and opportunities and care. We are generous toward others. We make an intentional effort to hear the cries of the needy, even if they are different from us. We give our time and resources to pursue God’s hope for every life. That’s a start.

At Church of the Saviour, our fourth essential practice of faithful discipleship is *Give*. What we ask of ourselves and each other is to give a percentage of our income back to God and to God’s work through the church. What percentage? Well, that’s between you and God. Several passages in scripture speak of a tithe. In most places, that standard is 10%. We think that’s a good target. But we also recognize that life is complicated, and the ideal is not always possible for everyone at every stage of life. And, some people have been blessed to be able to give more than 10% and have found their additional giving to be a great source of joy.

Here is what we suggest: consider prayerfully what God is calling you to give. Take stock of your financial resources and obligations. Your giving should not impoverish you, but at the same time, it should be meaningful. In the Bible book of 2 Samuel, King David had led the Israelites in a successful battle against their enemies. As an expression of gratitude, David wanted to offer a burnt offering. A man named Araunah offered his property for the sacrifice,

then also offered an ox and the wood free of charge. David appreciated his offer, but turned it down. He said, “I will not offer to God that which costs me nothing” (2 Samuel 24:24).

We think it’s important not just to determine the *amount* of money you give, but what *percentage of your income* that represents. Why? Because if 10% is the target, we should know how much that is and how far we need to grow to reach that target. By calculating the percentage, we’re also more likely to be intentional about what that gift represents. Instead of choosing a dollar amount that feels like a generous gift, consider what that gift represents out of all that God has given you.

Whatever you decide with God, giving should not be a grudging obligation. When God first called a people as God’s own, God blessed Abraham so that he might be a blessing to others (Genesis 12:1-3). The same is true for us. That is what it means to be part of God’s family – we are blessed to be a blessing. We are blessed so that we can bless others. And by giving generously and gratefully, we are further blessed with the joy of knowing how meaningful that gift is. We discover what Jesus meant when he said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). We give joyfully, knowing that “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Beyond what we give to God’s work, we also strive to be generous in our daily lives. With all five practices, there is a collective element and an individual element. For *Give*, the individual element is to perform five acts of generosity every month. You could buy lunch for a coworker, give a generous tip to your server (not 20% instead of 15%, but something truly unexpected like 40-50%). You could pay for the person in front of you at the coffee shop or behind you at the drive through. If you want to take it to another level, you could anonymously pay the fees for a child at your local school or contribute to their student needs fund. You don’t need to be a superhero. Just five times a month, go out of your way to be unexpectedly generous toward someone else. You’ll be amazed how much joy comes from simple acts of generosity, even if – and maybe *especially* if – we don’t get credit or thanks for having done it.

Today, we celebrate Foundation Sunday. Seventy years ago, a group of people led by Bob and Mary Elizabeth Klein recognized that, while Church of the Saviour was a blessing to them and this building was an asset for doing ministry, the time would come when it could become a burden to the congregation. They did not want us to have to choose between caring for the building and caring for our neighbors. So, they established the Church of the Saviour Foundation, a way to make legacy gifts that would support the church’s physical needs, while also providing funding for vital missions and startup funds for innovative new ministries.

If you read the annual report from the Foundation that came by mail this week, or if you are familiar with the work of the Foundation, you know that we could not be the church we are today without it. The Foundation provides ongoing funding for maintenance of our facilities, has provided lead gifts for capital campaigns, funds life-changing mission projects here in Cleveland and in far-flung places like Haiti and Cambodia and Zimbabwe, and supports new ministries from expanding staffing for children and families to our work with Greater Cleveland Congregations. On this day, we celebrate that legacy and the \$530,000 the Foundation provided in support of Church of the Saviour in 2024.

We know that we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us, but we should be careful not to ride on their coattails. The Foundation was created not to turn our church into a museum of what once was, but to ensure that it remains a dynamic source of hope. The gifts that shaped the Foundation were not given so we could give less today, but so that our gifts would fund the ongoing operation of the church without having to bear the full weight of maintaining an ageing building. We want to build on the foundation of faith we have inherited, to take the baton handed to us, and in time to hand it off to the next generation.

It is appropriate that we celebrate the Church of the Saviour Foundation on the day we focus on our fourth practice, because it invites us to reflect on the 70 years of the Foundation and on our place in the 100-year history of this congregation, in the 150-year history of the Methodist presence in Cleveland Heights, and in the timeless story of God and God's people. What contribution will we make to the story God is telling through us?

This is also a good day to remember that it is not only our financial resources we are called to give generously, but also our *spiritual* gifts and our time. If you haven't yet taken the spiritual gifts inventory, I encourage you to take it this week. If you took it but didn't give your name, then we do not know what your gifts are or how to connect you with opportunities that match your gifts (or *not* to ask you to participate in things that don't). If you completed it but didn't accept the invitation to meet with a navigator, you missed the best part of the process. It's in the one-on-one meeting that you experience the greatest benefit by exploring the intersection of your gifts and passions and where God needs you most. The Spiritual Gifts process isn't a devious technique to get you to volunteer for more things. It is about matching the amazing people God has brought together in this place with the right opportunities to serve. It not only helps make a good match, but can help avoid a match that isn't so good. It might also offer an alternative way of serving you'd never considered before. Let us know how we can help you to make Spiritual Gifts part of your discipleship journey.

Friends, we are blessed in amazing ways. All we have to do to realize that blessing is to pause, to look around us, and to see the amazing abundance God provides. We remember that we have been blessed not to hold tightly to those blessings for ourselves, but to release that blessing to be a blessing to others. God has entrusted us to be stewards: caretakers of all that God has provided. Give a percentage of your income back to God. Perform five acts of generosity you every month. Let us live as those who are grateful for what we have and who share generously in response to God's generosity toward us. God loves cheerful givers. Amen.



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