

## **“GIVING OUR GIFTS”**

Exodus 35:21-29; 1 Kings 17:8-16

Mark 14:1-4; Luke 8:1-3; Luke 19:2-9; Luke 21:1-4

Acts 9:36-42; Acts 16:13-15; 2 Corinthians 8:1-4

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Sometimes it's best to just let the scriptures speak for themselves. So I don't plan to add a great deal to what we've heard from our texts.

I love the perspective we can get from listening to several Biblical passages on the same theme. Each one adds a little something different to our understanding. It's almost like moving from two-dimensional to three-dimensional.

The “portraits of givers” that we heard all underline the way our faith tradition respects and values giving. I once heard someone say that we should get our sense of who we are not from what we have, but from what we give. That's rather counter-cultural in our materialistic society but it does call us to think about what really matters in the long run. Certainly all the people in these stories of giving are known to us by and because of what and how they gave. Their stories (and the fact that there are so many of them – the ones we heard are just a sampling) suggest that giving is an indispensable part of the life of faith.

But their stories are not all the same. The circumstances are different, as are the people and their motivations.

We have the Israelites, when they are still a nomadic, desert people, giving their best and most valuable possessions because they are inspired with the notion of making a beautiful sanctuary for the worship of God. I love how the story talks about their hearts being stirred and their spirits willing.

Then we have the widow who fed the prophet Elijah during a time of famine. She had to wrestle with her fears about whether giving to someone else would mean there wouldn't be enough for her own family's needs. Giving requires a certain element of trust, and that's not always easy, even when we want to help.

The woman who anointed Jesus gave extravagantly, generously, lovingly – from her heart, and not according to the expectations of others. The women disciples supported Jesus' ministry because they *believed* in it, having themselves experienced the healing power of God's grace through Jesus. Zacchaeus' giving was motivated by the grace he'd received and a desire to make reparations for the way his earlier greed had harmed others. A poor widow's small contribution represents a large sacrifice, and is all the more valuable in Jesus' eyes because of that.

Dorcas used her hands and her sewing skills to give to others. She probably regarded her skills as very humble, and yet they represented immense compassion and made a big impact on the people who benefited from them. Lydia, though she was a well-to-do businesswoman who could certainly have sent a nice cash contribution to support the preaching ministry of

Paul and his companions, instead gives in a much more personal way, opening her home and sharing hospitality.

Several of the early Christian communities, including the churches in Macedonia, were moved by concern and compassion to take up collections to help the Christians in Jerusalem when they were experiencing persecution and severe hardships ... this despite the fact that they themselves were quite poor. But their faith brought them a sense of abundance that, as Paul writes “overflowed in a wealth of generosity” toward people they did not know but to whom they felt connected as sisters and brothers.

I don't know which of these stories you might see yourself in. Maybe in all of them, at one time or another.

Just like these people of long ago, we have different circumstances, different hopes, different amounts of resources and different skills. We have different motivations. We have different struggles. Different needs speak to each of our hearts. But what we share in common, with each other and with them is that we are *givers*.

What do I mean by that? I don't mean that we are good people because we give or even that it's because we are good people that we give. I simply mean that it is our nature as human beings – our true nature, as God means it to be – to be givers. That's because we are made in the image of God, who is the ultimate Giver. And because we have received and been blessed by, not just God's *gifts*, but by God's *giving* to us such that we have been drawn into that circle of receiving that leads to gratitude and connection and ultimately to giving and to more blessing.

I noticed that nobody in the stories we heard gave out of guilt or duty or obligation. None of those people gave in order to impress someone else or to gain favor with God.

They gave because their hearts were stirred and their spirits were willing. They gave because worshipping God was important to them. They gave because they chose to trust God. They gave out of deep love. They gave because they believed in something. They gave because Jesus called them. They gave because they experienced the healing grace of Christ. They gave in repentance, to restore what was broken. They gave of their skills as well as their substance. They gave because they understood that every gift matters, and that the *act of giving* matters. They gave because they heard about a need, and they had compassion. They gave to people they did not know. They gave in ways that involved them deeply and personally with the work or the persons to whom they gave. They gave out of gratitude that overflowed in generosity.

These are the things that giving is really about. This is still what matters, what inspires This is still, even today, what givers look like. Is this how we see ourselves? The world tells us that we “make a statement” about who we are with our car or our house or our clothes or our technology. But the stories of our faith show us a different way to picture a “self” and a good life. They make us think about who we are and why we give. They challenge us. They push us beyond token gifts, mindless check-writing, easy or routine giving. They invite us to see ourselves as both gifted and giver, as part of the work ... and maybe even, like the people in today's stories, role models of faith expressed in generosity that overflows.