

Forty Days of Joy: Give!

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Matthew 13:44-46; 19:21-22

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. Matthew 13:44-46 (NRSV)

Jesus answered, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When the young man heard this, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Matthew 19:21-22 (NRSV)

Join me in prayer. *Gracious God open us up. Open our eyes that we might see and our ears that we might hear your word. Open our hearts, God, that we might feel, and our compassion might be renewed. And then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

I want to ask you three questions today; these are questions I've been asking myself and I want to encourage you to ask them to yourself as well. The first is this: "Who do you want to be?" Now there are some things about who we want to be or who we are that we don't get to choose. You don't get to choose whether you're tall or short, or whether you're old or young, or whether you're intelligent and gifted academically or athletically. You can do the best with what you've got but you don't get to pick what you start with. You don't get to pick who your parents are or what your background is. There are a lot of things that aren't your call. You just take them. Sometimes you can't choose things because of decisions you made a long time ago and you're living with the consequences of those decisions. If you're in prison, that has restricted your choices about who you'll be in that current situation.

As you get older you realize there are decisions that you made a long time ago that now you're living with, and certain forks in the road are no longer available to you. So you accept that - it is what it is.

But there are things you can choose about who you're going to be, intentional choices about who you're going to be. You'll see someone you admire, you find out about them, learn about them, and you'll think, "Man, I want to be like that lady! She's awesome!" Or, "Lord, don't let me be like that guy! Just deliver me from that." So you realize that you have choices about who you're going to be.

Now that happened to me many years ago when I was working with a group of people to start a church on the south shore of Clear Lake. It wasn't a particularly great time in my head. Not a particularly good time. We had four young kids at that time. I was working twelve-hour days; we were strapped for cash. I was working out of this sort of scarcity mentality, like I have to rein all this in. We've got to control this. We have to have to hold this fast. I was sort of working in that place.

So it was time to build our first building and we hired one of these capital campaign consultants to come talk to me about how we were going to build the building and raise the money. He sits in my office and says, "Now, Pastor Tom, your gift to this campaign is going to set the tone for what happens." I'm thinking, "I have nothing to give. I don't know what to do." Then he said, "And the sermon you preach is going to make the difference."

I studied for that, and these two Scripture passages that we read today, for whatever reason, they just ended up right next to each other in my studying. I looked at them and I said, "Here's one guy who holds on to everything he has, and he had great wealth. The Scripture says, 'And he went away sad.' And here's another guy who let's go of everything he has for the sake of the treasure in the field, and it says, 'And he went with joy and sold everything he had and bought the field.'" It was like an epiphany to me, "I want to be that guy. I don't want to be the guy who's sad and he's got great wealth. I want to be this guy who with joy is willing to let go of everything. How can I be that person that functions on this sort of scarcity mentality? I want to have open hands and an open heart. I want to be that person."

And here's what I've come to realize over the 20 years: That the people who are most joyous are also the people who are most generous. And people who are most generous are also the people who are also the most joyous, and I don't believe that's a coincidence.

Elizabeth Dunn is a professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia, a fairly young woman, and she's done a lot of research on the relationship between happiness and generosity. She did this study and came to conclude that even toddlers find joy in giving. Now toddlers don't care about money, so what did she give them of value? Goldfish crackers. This is important stuff. Let me read to you the results:

She wrote: "The data revealed that toddlers were pretty happy when they got this pile of Goldfish crackers for themselves, but they were actually even happier when they got to give some of the Goldfish away, and this warm glow of giving persists even into adulthood. When we analyzed surveys for more than 200,000 adults across the globe, we saw that nearly a third of the world's population reported giving at least some money to charity in the past month. Remarkably in every region of the world people who gave money to charity were happier than those who did not, even after taking into account their own financial situation. And the correlation was trivial but significant."

It proves what I've experienced anecdotally, that people who are most generous are going to experience more joy. So that's the guy I want to be. Who do I want to be? I want to be that guy who's open hearted and open handed.

Now the second question is that if giving is going to bring joy, what do I have to give? Think about that - what do you have to give? Money? All of us have different amounts of money but most of us at least have something we can give.

David Horton is the pastor of our Gethsemane campus and he preaches monthly over in Brookdale, an independent living senior adult community on Buffalo Speedway. About four years ago when he began preaching there, they wanted to take an offering. They asked what they should give the offering to and David said, "Well, we have a program at the Gethsemane campus called Summer Club House. It's a program for children in the neighborhood in the summer." They said, "Great! We'll give our offering to that." So they did, but what was interesting is that even on the Sundays he doesn't preach there, they still take up that offering, and they still give it to the Summer Club House. Over the years they fund most of our Summer Club House program - this little group at Brookdale. Last years it was about \$15,000.

Here's why I'm telling you this. When they take up the offering and they present it, they all clap, they all applaud. It's like they're saying, "Isn't this awesome!" It's like our Doxology - that's why we sing the Doxology when we bring our gifts forward. It's like we're saying, "Isn't this amazing!" There is joy in choosing to give what resources we have.

Is our money all we have to give? Sometimes it's what we focus on. But we have other things. We can give our time, our talent. Here at St. Luke's we have Five Habits and our fifth habit is that we give ourselves away in generosity and service. We can give the actual moments and works of our hands.

In the lobby of the Houston Methodist Hospital there's a round glass plate, and it has etched on it a quotation from Rabindranath Tagore, who's a Hindu Indian poet who was born in 1861 and who was kind of a mystic. The saying goes this way, "I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and learned that life is service. I acted and behold, service is joy." Boy, that's stuck with me. That we do learn that service is joy.

Many years ago when I was a youth pastor, we loaded up a group of youth and went to East Texas to do home repair work for people in some of the backwoods areas there. The county gave us some names and did the vetting for us. One group of our youth went to work on the home of an elderly lady. We were to straighten up and paint her front porch. Now we took people along who knew what they were doing - construction people - who understood how to do things like this. We were working on this lady's porch, just a covering over her front steps and there was a little spot for a chair. She was so appreciative. She'd come out and tell us how grateful she was. Then as we're working, about 10:30 in the morning, apparently, we did something wrong because the whole porch collapsed. Go team! We encourage people who serve to read a book called *Toxic Charity* about how not to do more harm than good. This could be an illustration.

No one got hurt, that was the good news. But it was not a good moment for this youth pastor - for just a minute it wasn't a good moment. As we were sitting there trying to figure out what to do, some of the youth said, "We can't leave it like this." So sure enough, they mustered some of those people who knew what they were doing and off they went to the lumber yard. They brought the stuff we needed, and they worked until 11 o'clock that night rebuilding that lady's porch. And as other groups finished their work they came over and did their part too. Pretty soon the whole youth group was there working together. They brought the vans around and turned on their headlights on the porch as the young people were working. We were supposed to be back at

the church where we were spending the night where they were providing dinner for us, but we called them and told them that we were going to keep working. They said that they'd leave the dinner there for us, so they skipped dinner and worked till 11 o'clock at night until they finished the porch.

When we got back in the van to go back to the church you would have thought we'd just been to Disney World. They were so pumped, so happy, so excited about the opportunity to actually make a difference in someone's life. That's where there's joy - when we see how we can make a difference.

I hate to say that we live in a culture - and I hate to say it this way - that when people post something on social media about an issue and they feel like they've made a difference. That's making a point. It's not making a difference. The people of God are called to be people who make a difference and we do that by serving, by putting ourselves in. There are all different ways to do that.

You can give your time and your service. You can give but let's read what the Scripture tells us we're supposed to give, or we can give. The Scripture says, "Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has." Then the next verse says, "And finding a pearl of great value he went and sold all that he had." Jesus tells the rich young man to sell all his possessions and come follow him.

The truth is we're to give all of ourselves. Everything. The whole deal. We're to be all in.

The great C.S. Lewis has written a lot about joy. In his book *The Weight of Glory* he writes: "It would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink, and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us. Like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is made by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

We are half-hearted creatures too often and in being so, we deprive ourselves of being infinite joy. When we think of someone who's all in, we think of people who give their lives for a particular cause. Like Father Gregory Boyle in Los Angeles with Homeboy Industries, or Brian Stephenson for Prison Reform, or Mother Teresa for the poor. But there are lots of ways to be all in.

I think of a woman named Brenda who has a child with special needs, and she is all in advocating for her son at the school and at the church and in the community and with Little League and every place to say, "Hey, we're not leaving my boy behind!" She's like a Mama Bear and she's all in - a woman on a mission. Or we used to have a Sunday school teacher here who taught sixth grade. Mary was her name and she knew the names of every one of her kids. She had that memorized. She was there every single week. She wrote every one of them a handwritten note on their birthday. She would find out what they were involved in and then write them notes encouraging or congratulating them. She followed them all the way through; even though she wasn't teaching them anymore, she knew what was going on in their lives and she followed them through their lives. She kept a file card index box with the name of each child and what they were involved in, and she would continue to make notes on her cards. She's just a Sunday school teacher who's all in.

It's a whole host of little things that makes us all in. We give our lives away, not in one fell swoop but in moment after moment after moment.

Now I want to be real here for a minute and say that when we choose to serve it isn't always fun. The things that we do are hard work sometimes, and they don't always feel like they're a lot of fun. But what they do is bring joy. It's not the same thing as fun. It's the joy of knowing that you've put your shoulder to the wheel, and you've spent your life working toward something that matters. That's what it means to be all in, to be all in for the Kingdom of God. To help grow the Kingdom of God all around us, to bring God's purposes to pass.

So what do you have to give? Everything. Every moment of your day and every dollar in your wallet. Every bit of you toward what you believe God is calling you to be behind, to care about.

One more question - where will you find him? Now that's an interesting question but it ties into this this way. Let me come at it from sort of a back way. I had a friend in seminary named Ed DeVerne and he was a high school and college wrestler from Michigan. He was a big guy who had a ponytail and wore gym shorts and T shirts all the time. He came from Michigan down to Dallas, so I guess he thought it was warm all the time. But that's what he wore.

He graduated from seminary and went back to serve in his home conference in Michigan and I still think all he had were gym shorts and T shirts. They sent him to some little Podunk church out in the middle of the rural Michigan and he still had his ponytail. In those days they didn't cotton much to that in those little local churches in the country, so he started way behind. They didn't like him coming in there in the first place. They were calling the District Superintendent and saying, "Who in the world have you sent us?"

Well Ed decided he was going to just visit people. He started with one of the most influential farmers and called him and said, "I'd like to come over on a Saturday and sit down and visit." The farmer said, "That's probably not going to work because I'm working on Saturdays. Here we work on Saturdays." Ed in a moment of brilliance said, "Can I come work with you?" And the farmer paused, and said, "Sure. I guess so. Never had a preacher do that before." So Ed went out and worked with him all day at the farm, and they became good friends, working there side by side. It's like the guy said to him, "Ed, you can come but if you want to be with me, I'm going to be working."

Where are you going to find Jesus? I hope maybe in this room a little bit. But most of the time if you want to find Jesus he's working. He's serving, he's doing something, he's leaning into stuff. Yes, there are times when we pray to Jesus and we sit face to face, but Jesus said, "I came to be the one who serves." He washed the feet of his disciples. If we want to be with him, he said, "A disciple is not above his master." If we want to be with him then we serve, too.

What did the passage say? "Sell all you have and come follow me. Do what I do." If we want to be with Jesus, we go serve beside him.

My wife will sometimes on Sunday afternoon go to the grocery store. Apparently, everyone goes on Sunday afternoon because she sees fifty people, she knows at the grocery store and it takes forever. She'll say to me sometimes, "Tom, will you go to the grocery store with me?"

Now Sunday afternoon is my nap time. It's not my "going to the grocery store" time. So I say, "You don't need me at the grocery store." And she'll say, "I need you to get the stuff off the top shelves that I can't reach." I think, "Surely you can find somebody who can get the stuff off the top shelf. Just get in the cart, stand up and you can reach the stuff on the top shelf. Come on!"

Here's the truth. She doesn't really need me at the grocery store; she just wants us to be together. God doesn't need us to accomplish God's purposes. It's not like we need to live with this weight of guilt on our shoulders that we're not leaning in enough. It's just that God wants to

be with us and that's what God does. That's how God works, that's God's way of life. God says, "I want you to come about this way of life because this way of life that I'm showing you is joyous and wonderful and incredible. And I want it to be for you for us to be together."

So who do I want to be? I want to be that guy - the joyous one. Open hearts, open hands. And what do I have to give? Money, service, my whole life. And where will I find him? Well, he's working. He's serving and I want to go and serve with him.

The Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu are good friends, which I find so cool for some reason. They're both Nobel Prize winners. They spent a week together and brought an author with them, and the week they spent together conversations were about joy. The author just recommended those conversations. I recommend the book - it's called *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*. I should have just skipped this whole series and just read you a chapter each week. It's a great book.

Let me read to you what one of the passages from the book, what Archbishop Tutu said: "So the Archbishop said with a laugh, 'Our book says that it is in giving that we receive.' So I would hope that people would recognize in themselves that it is when we are closed in on ourselves that we tend to me miserable. It is when we grow in self-forgetfulness in a remarkable way, I mean that we discover that we are filled with joy. I've sometimes joked and said, "God doesn't know very much math because when you give to others it should be that you are subtracting from yourself." But in this incredible kind of way I've certainly found that to be the case so many times. You gave, and then it seems like in fact you are making space for more to be given to you. And there is a very physical example. The Dead Sea in the Middle East receives fresh water, but it has no outlet, so it doesn't pass the water out. It receives beautiful water from the rivers and the water then goes dank. I mean it just goes bad. That's why it's the Dead Sea. It receives and does not give. We are made much that way, too. We receive, and we must give. In the end generosity is the best way of becoming more, more, and more joyful."

That's the guy I want to be.

Let's pray. *Loving God, we confess that sometimes we operate out of this sense of scarcity or fear, and you call us to be people who just give, who give ourselves away knowing that you will fill us up when we do so. So, God, show us how we can open our hands more so that we might live that joyful life that you show us how to live. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.*