

Overflowing with Cheerful Giving

Third of three messages in the 2021 Stewardship Focus “Overflowing”

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- Psalm 23 (Common English Bible)¹ The LORD is my shepherd. I lack nothing.
² He lets me rest in grassy meadows; he leads me to restful waters; ³ he keeps me alive.
He guides me in proper paths for the sake of his good name. ⁴ Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no danger because you are with me. Your rod and your staff – they protect me.
⁵ You set a table for me right in front of my enemies.
You bathe my head in oil; my cup is so full it spills over!
⁶ Yes, goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the LORD’s house as long as I live.
- 2 Corinthians 9:7 (New International Version) Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

God loves a cheerful giver. That’s what Paul wrote. Is that a sales ploy by Paul, a slogan Paul used to try to motivate the reluctant Corinthians to contribute to the special offering being collected to help the Christians in Jerusalem? No. It’s the simple truth.

God loves a cheerful giver because that’s God’s nature, too.

God gives us all we have, giving generously and constantly. Not reluctant. Not begrudging. Not keeping a record of accounts – what God’s paid out versus what God’s received in return. God gives cheerfully, joyfully, generously because that is God’s nature.

We hear it throughout the Bible. The Bible’s initial mythic story of the creation of the world assumes that God simply wanted to make it happen. God spoke the universe into existence, formed humankind from the elements of the earth, and entrusted it all to our use and care.

During this summer’s sermon series on the life of Moses, we heard story after story of God’s generosity. God came to the rescue of the Hebrew people and gave them a way out of captivity. God gave the people leadership in the persons of Moses and his brother Aaron. While in the wilderness God provided the people with sources of bread and meat and water to drink. God provided them with a Promised Land, a place of opportunity. And of course, all the while God provided them with an identity as a people belonging to God, a people striving to be faithful to God. God is a generous, joyful, cheerful giver.

At a point in human history, at a point in the history of God’s people, God gave us God’s own presence embodied in flesh in the birth of Jesus the Son. And in Jesus’ thirty-third year when his world-changing life was perceived as a threat to the status quo and the powers of the world conspired to kill Jesus, God generously gave us the gift of eternal life through Christ’s resurrection.

God loves a cheerful giver because that is God’s nature: overflowing generosity.

We’re invited to embody that quality of God in our lives: cheerfully giving from our resources and treasures, our skills and passions.

Where do you see cheerful givers in your life? Do you see one in the mirror?

Let me tell you about a husband and wife in a church I used to serve in suburban Detroit. I'll call them Darrell and Joan. Darrell was a retired engineer at Ford, Joan was a retired public-school teacher. They had lived their whole married life in a lovely little bungalow in a middle-class suburb of Detroit.

Darrell and Joan loved Alma College, a small Presbyterian liberal arts college right in the center of the state of Michigan. After they had raised their three children, Darrell and Joan designed their lifestyle so they might be able to give as much as they could to support student scholarships at Alma College. They never moved to a bigger house. They kept their cars much longer than many in Detroit's auto industry tended to do. They supported their church, of course. But Alma College was their passion.

Something Darrell said to my wife still sticks with me.

While I was out of town leading a week of church camp, one night Darrell and Joan took my wife Mary to a local cafeteria-style restaurant. If it's been awhile since you've patronized one, let me remind you of two things about cafeterias:

- first, everything is *a la carte*, so you pay for every item you choose;
- and second, those cafeterias always put desserts at the front of the line, hoping you'll select one before your overlaid tray convinces you that you probably don't need dessert.

As Mary started sliding her cafeteria tray down the long tubular shelf, Darrell turned to her and said in his gentle whisper, "We don't eat dessert here." As they approached the cash register he added, "We just drink water here." That epitomized their approach to living. Cafeteria dessert was \$1.35, and a soft drink would have been another dollar — money that they'd rather give to Alma College than to the cashier. The choices weren't painful; they were an expression of joy at what their small sacrifice could mean for college students needing scholarships to stay in school. Darrell and Joan were cheerful givers.

God invites us to follow the pattern God has established: giving of our lives cheerfully. God loves a cheerful giver because that's God's nature, too.

I know I've seen it in my life.

When I was getting my first degree at McCormick Seminary in Chicago I worked my way through school. Well... sorta. I got some scholarships from the seminary. My wife worked full-time for the seminary. Though I was a full-time student, I had a part-time job in the seminary library. I also made a little money from time to time as a student preacher in local churches.

But what really made the difference — what enabled Mary and me to live in Chicago on what we were making — what made the difference was the fact that Mary's mom and dad paid our rent for the entire two-and-a-half years I was in seminary. I don't recall us asking them to do that. They just started doing it. Bob and Jane joyfully and generously and consistently made it possible for their daughter and her husband to follow this call to ministry. They were cheerful givers.

I was talking with a friend in town who needed to replace his old car that was starting to nickel-and-dime him to death, but he was hard-pressed find the nickels and dimes and dollars to make that happen. Out of the blue, one of his friends called him. It seems his friend had a fairly new car that was barely being used because he was now working from home. "Here's a crazy idea," his friend said. "What if we swap cars? I'll

take your old car and you have my newer one.” And that crazy idea is just what happened! The man cheerfully gifted his friend in a generous manner that made all the difference for the friend.

On the news the other night I heard the story of 18-year-old Taft Foley, a high school senior in Houston, Texas. Taft’s fascination with medicine prompted him to complete studies to become an EMT as soon as he was of legal age. When the coronavirus hit Houston, Taft despaired at the great number of people who struggled just to be tested for the virus. “There had to be a better way,” Taft said.

So Taft started a mobile testing lab. To raise the money for materials and equipment to get started he sold his video game consoles. He hit up friends and relatives for donations. He talked to area auto dealers and secured donations of vans and graphics wrapping the vans with a message announcing that this was a free mobile coronavirus testing lab.

Each weekend Taft spends most of his time offering free testing to veterans, to unsheltered homeless persons, to senior citizens. To those who can pay, part of the fee covers free testing for those who can’t. Taft told the reporter, “There need to be more people willing to help others without expecting anything in return.”

What would cause a high school kid to do all that? Did he do it to pad his resume? To add zip to his college application? To make the evening news in Houston? Why would a young man go to such lengths, selling off cherished video game consoles and hitting up relatives for donations and rounding up community businesses and organizations to fund his non-profit program? Why would he give up his senior year as a varsity wrestler, a sport Taft won championships in? Why would he give up his weekends to interact with veterans and seniors and the homeless instead of hanging with his friends?

Taft is acting out of the joy of doing for others. He has said, “People need help, and I wanted to be the one to reach out my hand to help them.” His choices, his actions, his generosity embody the free and joyful spirit of the “cheerful giver” that the apostle Paul commended. Taft finds joy in sharing his interest, his time, his compassion for others. I’m not sure I’ve heard of a clearer example of a “cheerful giver” than young Taft Foley.¹

At this time of year we’re encouraged to deliberately reflect on our stewardship — our caretaking — of the financial and relational and spiritual blessings of God that overflow in our lives. God invites us to be cheerful givers because that is God’s nature. What’s the story that others will tell about you? What decision will you make, what action will you take, that will cause others to picture you when they think of a “cheerful giver?”

[sermons: se20201025; © 2020 Jon M. Fancher]

¹ “NBC Nightly News with Lester Holt,” aired October 17, 2020, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zshwHUAimqkY>, accessed 10/19/2020