

SLD11.08.09 32nd Ordinary Stewardship
Emory Presbyterian Church
Hebrews 11:32-12:4
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“How Much Is Enough?”

The question before us on this Stewardship Sunday is “How Much Is Enough?” And because it’s Stewardship, we imagine the rest of the question is…”how much is enough money to give the church?” But I say it’s a broader question than that. What if the question really is, “How much is enough to thank God? How much is enough to follow Jesus? How much is enough to sacrifice? To deny yourself? To share? To volunteer? To be faithful?” Or, as we asked a couple of weeks ago on Reformation Sunday, “how good do we have to be?”

I’m telling you, these questions are killing me. There’s no hiding behind lectionary on this stuff, or even doctrine. If the answers to the questions we’re asking during this sermon series comprise a road map to righteousness, if they’re where the rubber hits the road for us faithful, what all I keep bumping up against is…open road. Smooth sailing. Very few skid marks. Me, you, we tool along Jesus’ Way the best we can, as stressed and scared as our Godless neighbor down the street, but still trying to do the right thing, even while counting on God’s forgiveness. We do, we give, we forgive, we pray, we volunteer, we share…but for God’s sake, how much is enough?!

A hint about listening to my sermons: if you ever wonder where I’m heading with a sermon, check out the hymn that follows it. It’s usually meant to echo in music what I’ve been trying to convey in words. And what’s the hymn following today’s sermon?

That’s right. “Take My Life.”

So there it is. Question: How much is enough? Answer: Take My Life. The Cliff Notes of today's proclamation, in case you have some errands to do.

Meanwhile, let's listen to some holy history about how much has been enough via today's text from Hebrews. Beginning with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, the writer of Hebrews outlines how much the faithful have given — given up, given back, given up, given over, throughout the millennia. Until time fails the writer to tell of how many ways the faithful have said to God, "Take My Life."

Read Hebrews 11:32b-38. Take my life.

Check out the gospels - Jesus died on the cross. Take my life. He writes...12:3. After all, he says, "you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood." (12:4)

Jesus did – shed his blood, I mean. We all know that. So did the Apostle Paul.

Listen to the front of my favorite greeting card of all time (from I Corinthians 11:23-28)

Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for Emory church.

Inside the card it reads – "and how was *your* day?"

The models of our faith gave so much! Their whole lives for the sake of their Lord. It was they to whom the writer of Hebrews is referring when he reminds the ordinary folk who were complaining about growing weary and losing heart. "Hey," he says. "Get over yourselves! In *your* struggle against sin you've hardly resisted to the point of shedding your *blood*." Like Abraham, Moses, Rahab, and Judith did, like *Jesus* did, like so many of the saints and martyrs since have done, he implies.

“Take my life,” we’re about to sing.

Okay, but, how *much* of my life? To the point of courting poverty? To the point of shedding blood? To the point of losing life altogether? Jesus does tell his followers to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him, that those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for Jesus’ sake will save it. (Mk.8:34-35)

But didn’t Jesus’ death on the cross take care of that? Even before Jesus, didn’t God make clear that ritual sacrifices and offerings were no longer top of the divine Christmas list? The writer of Psalm 51 penned to God, “You take no delight in sacrifice; were I to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.” The prophet Amos quoted God as saying, “I hate, I despise your festivals. I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offering of ...your fatted animals I will not look upon.” (Amos 5:21-22.) The prophet Micah described a cheeky Israel fawning before a displeased God, “With what shall we come before the Lord, and bow ourselves before God on high? Shall we come before God with our tithes and offerings? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of pledgers? With ten thousand tithers? (Micah 6:6-8)

“Heck no!,” retorts Micah. “God has shown you what is good, O mortal; ...and that ain’t it!”

Then how much *is* enough?

A rich young man comes to Jesus and asks what he has to do to earn eternal life. (Mt. 19:16) He’s a good guy, this young fellow, an elder in the church, the chair of a committee, a competent leader, a humble and willing follower of the rules. Is that enough? “Well, if you wish to be *perfect*,” Jesus advises the young man, “you’ve got to

go a little further. Go sell your possessions and give the money to the poor.” Well, that’s *too* much for the young man, and he goes away sad.

Is *that* how much enough is? Selling all our possessions and giving the money to the poor? Is it a matter of quantity?

Then along comes this poor old widow and all she drops in the bucket is two lousy mites, yet Jesus lifts *her* before to his disciples as an *exemplar*. Why? What does the poor widow offer that the rich young man doesn’t? What about her gift makes it more valuable to God than the young man’s stellar behavior, the priests’ burnt offerings, Israel’s ten thousand tithers? What does the widow give that pleases God more than any of these?

Her heart.

The widow gives her heart. Her love, her trust, her faith, her fearless surrender to God’s will. The widow gives her heart.

Recall the anxious little kid who frets in the stable before the newborn baby Jesus? “What can I give Him,” ask the child, “poor as I am?” If I were a shepherd, I’d bring him a lamb. If I were a wise man, I’d sure do my part. But what can I give him? I know,” says the kid, “I’ll give Him my heart!”¹

Which is all God ever wants, is all God ever aches for, from Israel, from the rich young man, from the widow, from you and me. Our hearts.

How much is enough? Nothing more or less than your whole heart. That’s what Jesus gives and that’s what Jesus wants back. Your whole heart. My whole heart. And whatever happens next, it will be enough.

¹ http://www.sing-and-pray.de/texte/ill_give_him_my_heart.html

But despite his many assets and good and pious behavior, the rich young man cannot give his heart to Jesus. The *real* window into that young man's soul is his checkbook and Jesus knows it. Look there and you'll see what the young man *really* values. For, as Jesus likes to point out from time to time, "where your treasure is, that's where your heart will be also." The young man's heart is with his treasure, and whatever it takes, Jesus wants it back.

You know, besides the Kingdom, Jesus talks more about money in the gospels than any other thing. And why is that, do you suppose?

Perhaps it's because Jesus came to set us free from whatever binds us. And what binds a lot of us a lot of the time is fear of having enough, especially these days of challenge and uncertainty in the economy, of high unemployment and low, low cash flow, and not a whole lot of confidence in the immediate future.

How much is enough? Good question. Who of us knows what it's like to have enough of everything? Parker Palmer asks whether we live out of a sense of abundance or a sense of scarcity. Me, I go back and forth. I look at our 2010 Challenge Budget that anticipates \$20,000 more in expenses than anticipated income, and I think "scarcity." I look at our new vision statement, our splendid new members, our excellent staff, and I think "abundance." I look at our aging facility and the cost of utilities, and I think scarcity. I regard our wonderful location, our renewed commitment to mission, and the sweet, sweet spirit in this place, and I think abundance.

Either way, how much is enough to keep our doors open? To balance our budget? To replace the boiler and the roof? To dedicate to mission? To pay our staff? To start an endowment? To proceed on faith?

For over ten years this church has operated on a deficit budget, and with no endowment, we're on the home stretch of our reserves. Yet we have energetic staff, program, music, preaching, new members and new ideas for how to minister to those who are not here yet. And we're about to install a permanent pastor for the first time in six years. Scarcity or abundance?

Our faith doesn't ask us to figure that out so much as to give what God asks in full confidence that whatever happens next will be enough.

And what can you give Him? What can you bring?
What can you offer that's fit for a King?
Bow before Jesus, that's where you can start.
What can you give Him? Just give Him your heart.

And you can be sure that whatever happens next, it will be enough.

So I finished writing this sermon last night. But then I got up this morning and thought to myself, "just give God my heart?! Like that's easy? Like giving anybody your whole heart is just a decision you happen to make one day?" Maybe for Methodists who are big on moments of conversion. But for us Presbyterians and anybody else who's launched into a relationship or a career or a spiritual path or any other big commitment with all the unfettered enthusiasm of a newbie surely comes to know better over a little time just how hard it is to live in to a thing. To remain loyal to it. To burn through its challenges. To tolerate its demands. Or, for that matter, simply to endure its perpetual ordinariness.

Just give God our heart? Not an easy move at all nor one that looks the same for everybody.

I'll tell you what it looks like for me because I spent my whole damn sabbatical chewing on the question. In fact, I'm pretty sure I've spent my whole damn *life* chewing

on that question. And for me, it looks like struggle. To me it looks like pain.

Notwithstanding what I said earlier, to me it looks and feels like sacrifice. Many of you know my life-long issues with commitment. Giving my whole heart to *anyone*, never mind to God, entails, for me, extraordinary risk. For me it's not an act of will, a matter of "making up my mind." How many times have I done *that* only to discover I couldn't or wouldn't or shouldn't comply with my own self-imposed decision?

No, for me, giving my heart to God is more like jumping off a cliff, again and again and again. And plenty of times I don't want to do it. And plenty of times I don't do it. But the cliff keeps calling me because off that cliff is the heart of God, calling to my heart.

So at times like this, like Stewardship, when we actually dare to talk about money and how much we do or don't have individually or as a church, what I'm wanting to get across is that "how much" we give is not the question. If you're growing to be a believer, you might even regard it as a goofy question, because of course the answer is *everything!* God gives us everything we have. Of course, the appropriate response is take my life, take my hands, my will, my silver and my gold, my heart, my whole heart. But actually following through with that...well....

All I'm saying is...I'm trying. I'm really trying. And I find it harder than hell.

For example, speaking of "taking my life," I'm making (yet another) commitment to this church. If you'll have me, I'm sticking around. Long term commitment not being my strong suit, this is the hardest decision I've made since I agreed to marry 18 years ago. (which, as you see, didn't turn out so well.)

And me, I tithe. And then some. Because tithing is another risk out there on the edge that beckons toward the cliff.

And I keep weighing, weighing, weighing, what I want to do and what I imagine God wants me to do, and damn if God doesn't keep winning.

And I get scared and I get worn out and I start backpedaling and trying to figure out the future. But then, if I'm lucky, I get a minute to pause and pray and ground myself in God and calm down enough to trust. To surrender. To vest my heart in heart of God, and make my life decisions accordingly.

To me this is Stewardship. Not just our annual stewardship season, which, in this church is mercifully brief, but stewardship of all God gives us all the time. Stewardship is our response to God's gift of life itself. And it's hard. So you see why I couldn't bear to end this sermon with a smarmy line like "just give God your heart and whatever happens next will be enough." There's truth to it but it's a hard won truth. Because, at least for me, it's not always easy to give God even an authentic corner of my attention, never mind my whole heart. And on the occasion I do, well, I rarely feel like my response is enough.

Still, I *am* trying. I am risking the effort. Can you say the same?

To the glory of God. Amen.