



“Joyful Giving”

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Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California***

***Stewardship Sunday
May 17, 2009
II Corinthians 9:6–8***

SCRIPTURE READING

II Cor. 9:6–8

Mary Haro

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. **Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.** And 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.

“GOD LOVES A CHEERFUL GIVER”

I grew up hearing today’s scripture reading said every Sunday by our pastor, Pastor Anderson, at the Lutheran church in my hometown. I especially remember the phrase, “God loves a cheerful giver.” When Pastor Anderson said it, I knew that it was time to get my nickel, dime, or quarter out of my pocket that my dad had handed me as we were walking into church.

Our stewardship theme that was chosen for this year, by our Wonderful Stewardship Committee, is a paraphrasure of Pastor Anderson’s offering invitation—“Joyful Giving.” Much to my delight, our committee has found ingenious and imaginative ways to express the words of the apostle who first wrote those words to the church at Corinth.

Eden’s stewardship season began on Easter Sunday when our Stewardship Committee asked each liturgist to introduce the Sunday offering by sharing a personal story about “Joyful Giving.” And share they did. Each story has been uniquely personal and inspired. Today I’ll share a couple of my own.

Like a lot of phrases one hears in childhood, I didn’t understand the full meaning of the sentence, “God loves a cheerful giver,” until I was an adult. And I am still learning what this sentence means: “God loves a cheerful giver.” Perhaps you are too.

A WADING POOL FOR SUSIE AND CHRISIE

The anticipation and birth of my nieces, Susie and Chrisie, whom many of you have met in their adulthood, invoked and instilled in me a deeper meaning of what joyful giving is all about than I had understood or remembered as a youth. Susie is now 23 and Chrisie is 21.

I still remember anticipating their births, and in those anticipatory times venturing into children's clothing stores and toy stores where I had rarely traveled before. As a graduate student and later as a financially strapped young pastor, I recall having to squelch the urge to buy everything in the store that I thought was cute or fun for the girls. I bet the grandparents in the congregation can relate to that feeling too.

If you were here for our wedding, you may remember that my sister offered a toast at the reception and recounted how her girls think of me as their "Santa Claus Aunt." I cannot deny that characterization. I loved being Susie and Chrisie's "Joyful Giver Superhero" who provided the things that the girls really wanted, especially when they were children.

Since Susie and Chrisie already had ponies, and all the farm animals and pets that they could imagine, I focused on providing other things that their mother and dad were not as able to offer in their younger lives while they were still expanding the family ranch.

So I was the one who provided some of the fancy store-bought dresses, and the more elaborate toys, like a Playschool farm and a Playschool airport. The airport, as you might imagine, was pure propaganda on my part as it came with imaginary games that I taught them. OK, girls, "Today, let's pretend that we are flying to Boston and visiting Aunt Ar, and when we get there, we'll go to the Aquarium, and walk on the Freedom Trail, and see The Old South Church."

Perhaps the most memorable present, for me, of all the gifts that I gave them over the years was the gift of their first wading pool. Neither of the girls remembers the time that they picked it out and we brought it home. But they do remember me telling the story over and over again, and about how I reveled in their delight of the new wading pool.

Susie was three and one-half, and Chrisie was half her age at the time we bought that pool. I had blown two weeks of vacation as an urban pastor to fly to rural Arkansas and spell my weary twin sister, during a long hot summer of childrearing. To give Mar an extra special break, I loaded up the girls in my brother-in-law's old Ford 4-wheel-drive pickup and drove us to town to buy groceries and cool off in the Wal-Mart air conditioning while their mother took a nap.

To encourage good behavior at the grocery store, I told the girls that if they were helpful and polite in the store we could visit the pet department at Wal-Mart and play with their new kittens and bunnies. They complied. I obliged.

Not far from the pet department was the toy department which featured a load of new wading pools that the manager had just procured. The pools were purportedly offered at a discount. The girls took one look, and tried to get in. There was no water. They were so excited. I lived to please them. So I asked, "Shall we take one home?"

They replied with immediate yeses, and squeals as they jumped up and down.

"OK," I said. I'll ask the stock person to take one up to the counter for us.

Ching-ching! A few minutes later, the pool was in the back of the pickup, and I had two very happy little girls in the front seat with me. When we arrived at the ranch, the girls unbuckled their seat belts, and jumped up and down on the front seat of the truck saying repeatedly, "Ar bought us a swimming pool. Ar bought us a swimming pool."

As we pulled up in front of their house, I told the girls to run in and put their swimming suits on while I carried in the groceries, and then we'd wake up Mommy and have her help us unload the pool and fill it with water. The rest is history.

III

MEAT AND POTATOES FOR US

As I thought about that swimming pool purchase this past week, and about many experiences of giving, the thought occurred to me that very few of us get to spend the majority of our life experiencing that kind of joy—the joy of giving children their first wading pool. We are too busy trying to provide the necessities of life for those whom we love.

This truth is lost on children generally. At least it was lost on me as a child.

I remember, for example, one time my Grandma Nehring saying something like, "Your daddy loves you so much." "Hmm," I said, "How do you know?" (I was a precocious child.) I don't think I've ever actually heard him say that phrase. (Swedish Lutherans are not what you'd call an expressive people.)

Grandma very astutely said, "Your dad loves you so much that he got up this morning, did the chores before you were out of bed, and then worked all day in the field until dark, so that you could have food to eat, clothes to wear, and shoes on your feet."

"Oh," I thought to myself. "Now I get it. God loves a cheerful giver."

IV

JOYFUL GIVING

The truth about this Stewardship Sunday and this season is that we won't be buying swimming pools with the money that we pledge to, and serve the mission and ministry of, Eden Church. We will be paying the PG&E, water and sewer, and insurance bills. We will be keeping our covenants with our professional staff by paying the compensation that we promised them. And we will be buying church school curriculum, a few new pieces of choir music, and funding our Spirit-in-Action and other community ministries programs.

With our time and talent, we will be going to board and committee meetings, pulling weeds, washing dishes, providing childcare, making snacks, stuffing worship bulletins, singing in the choir, answering the phone, counting the offering, repairing broken windows, and greeting visitors at Gay Prom.

We will not be buying swimming pools, or filling them with water. Yet our kind of giving is even more important than giving the extras. And, as we share joyfully (if not exuberantly) of our time, talent, and treasure, we will definitely be doing the work of God, who loves us like a responsible parent—perhaps not with a lot of flash—but most certainly with a lot of love.

And I trust that we will be pledging and giving and receiving with a great deal of joy—joy born of a spiritual maturity that is mindful of God's abundant grace, of the gifts that we have already received, as we provide the essentials of life in the Christian household for all whom God has entrusted to our care and keeping.

V

AN INVITATION TO GIVING

Dear friends, remember the apostle's words to the early Corinthian Christians: "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."

Remember the words of Bill Coburn. "Say it with me now, 'God loves a cheerful giver.'"

And thanks for sharing. Amen.