

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

27th Sunday after Pentecost
Year C

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Text: 1 Timothy 6:18-19

Title: “Moving Out of Scare City: Altars Everywhere”

When I was 16 or 17 years old I was in church most Sundays. It wasn't like when I was younger when our mother brought my brother, sister and I to church every Sunday. When we were older teenagers we were given latitude so I wasn't there every week, but I was already hooked on God. I already accepted that the way of Jesus was the way for me, that Jesus was the One who Saved and I certainly wanted and needed saving. So I was already shaped by the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount and the parables of Jesus in ways I sometimes did not even recognize in myself. I had also already acquired the habit of giving as our mother every Sunday had our Sunday school offering envelopes on the table waiting for us to take and share in our respective classes. Every week.

Yet, I remember as a growing but imperfect, teen Christ follower, wondering how much to give now that I had my own job and was earning my own money. I gave but not very much and though I knew I should give, I was trying to figure out what this all had to do with faith, and I just wasn't there yet. There was a car to pay for, gas to buy, college to save for, dates with the girlfriend, gifts to give, weekends away to pay for. There was a lot of stuff to pay for, and somehow it never seemed that there was enough money. I was working after school at JC Penney's as a bicycle mechanic and then on weekends doing auto body repair and painting with my Dad or my brother for people needing work done. When I could, I also worked for my Dad at his small business installing garage doors and openers. I was always employed, it seemed, doing something to earn, spend and save, but I was still not quite getting the linkage between giving and faith. And as I said it always seemed like there wasn't enough money.

Thinking about this, one of the things the Financial Peace University class has clarified for me--and I expect for the rest of the class--is that we really are products of our culture. We want more and in order to get more, the ingenious credit card companies have done a marvelous job marketing that we can have more just by holding a piece of plastic with numbers and a magnetic strip. Not just plastic, but also loans—some are interest free--believe it or not--sometimes for years! That's all we need to have more! All we need are plastic and loans, and we can have what our hearts desire. And it has left many of us burdened to such a degree that we do not have the kind of inner peace God desires for us, the kind of contentment written about in the letter to Timothy, and--when we think deeply enough--what we truly need and seek: the life

that really is life. What then do we do? What do money and possessions have to do with being a follower of Christ?

So much in scripture speaks to the issue of money and possessions. Preachers, though, have generally been uncomfortable talking about it because it has raises fears for some, anger for others. I know I've heard my fair share of people tell me they left such and such a church because the preacher was always talking about money. I know of others who use their offerings as a way to protest if they don't like something happening at a particular church at a particular time. They decide to quite giving. And I will tell you straight up that I wince at talking about money because I do not subscribe to the kind of manipulating methods I've witnessed in some TV evangelists who somehow appeal to people in such a way that they make millions of dollars themselves while the poor are left unfed, the vulnerable left on the sidelines. And yet, there is no escaping the fact that the use of money and faith are related. The Bible is replete with wisdom when it comes to this topic.

We have this story of Jacob shared during the children's time. Jacob, the guy who cheated his brother, Esau, out of so much. He was running away from his angry brother when he has this powerful experience of God's presence in this dream of angels moving up and down the staircase to and from heaven. God then promises to stand with him no matter what and to provide what he needs no matter what. God commits to Jacob wholeheartedly.

“I'm giving the ground on which you are sleeping to you and to your descendants,” God tells Jacob. “Your descendants will be as the dust of the Earth; they'll stretch from west to east and from north to south. All the families of the Earth will bless themselves in you and your descendants. Yes. I'll stay with you, I'll protect you wherever you go, and I'll bring you back to this very ground. I'll stick with you until I've done everything I promised you.” (The Message)

So when Jacob wakes from his dream he is so filled with passionate gratitude for God's promises to him and simply the recognition that God was in this place that the scripture says “he was afraid”. It's not the kind of fear a person might have if their lives were threatened, but rather it's the kind of fear I experienced when hiking Rocky Mountain National Park, standing on the top of Hallett's Peak and recognizing how small I really am in the grand scheme of life and how beyond-words-great God is who created it all and causes us to burst in song “How Great Thou Art!” when we experience such awe. It's a recognition of God who--as the first letter to Timothy describes--“...gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. 16 It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.”

Jacob wakes recognizing that he is the dust of the earth like the rest of us and God is the one who shapes us into life and gives us breath. That's the fear of Jacob as he wipes the sleep from his eyes. Jacob wakes with the kind of joy a hard fighting cancer survivor experiences when the oncologist says, “You're clear. Now go enjoy your grandchildren and the rest of your long life.”

With this passionate joy and awe welling up from within, Jacob makes a couple of decisions. First, he will mark this awesome place with a stone, an altar to remember that it was

here that he encountered God. This is the place when he was alone and running for his life that God came to him and made it known that God would not abandon him but would stick with him no matter what and that Jacob had a future. So he created an altar to God by arranging a stone in such a way that it would be clear someone did it intentionally and for a purpose. This was a fixed testimony to Jacob's encounter with God.

But then Jacob makes another decision. In the midst of worship at this altar dedicated to God, in response to God's promise to him, Jacob makes his own promise to God:

“If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, ²¹ so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, ²² and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you.”

Jacob promises to tithe, to give one tenth of his income out of gratitude for and in awe of God. Notice that God doesn't demand this of Jacob. This isn't a forced tax. It is Jacob's willing, joyful response to God who has given him everything. Jacob decides to tithe because he trusts that God will do what God says: to be with him no matter what and to provide what he needs—maybe not what he wants—but what he needs in order to live. It is really a faith act because it requires Jacob to trust that God will provide.

Dave Ramsey, the author of Financial Peace University, has a beautiful take on giving when he describes God as a giver. Throughout scripture God provides for people. The story starts out with God creating the universe and giving life to human beings, creating them in God's image. At some point God decides to enter the world as a man, to get closer, and in John's Gospel that man—Jesus—says that “God so loved the world that he GAVE his only Son that whoever believes in him shall have eternal life. Indeed, God sent the son into the world not to condemn the world but that through him the world might have life.” Can you imagine giving that kind of gift for anyone? We have an only son, but I can't imagine giving him up. But God did. God is a giver, and way back at the beginning of the story, Genesis says that God created man and woman in God's image, which means if God is a giver and we are created in God's image, then we were created to be givers, too. It is in our very nature to give.

But here's the kicker, according to Ramsey, God doesn't need your money. God, after all, is the creator of the universe. God gets it all in the end anyway. It all belongs to God, so God doesn't need your money or mine. Then why give?

You may remember Abraham who the Bible says was “blessed to be a blessing”. God didn't bless Abraham so he'd keep it all to himself. God blessed Abraham and Sarah so they would in turn be a blessing to others. Why give? So you can be a blessing to others.

Why give? Because as Jesus taught

19 “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; 20 but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure

is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)

Why give? Because God wants our hearts. God doesn't need our money. God wants our hearts, which is why I think Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

(2 Corinthians 9:7)

Giving that comes from the heart is done cheerfully. It's not the kind of giving of some who will withdraw it if things don't go their way. It's the kind of giving that wakes up with a heart of gratitude for God's promises and gifts and says, "Here, Lord, I want to give this to you. I am grateful for all you provide and all that you promise, and I want to be a blessing to others. I trust you to provide what I need." It is the kind of giving prescribed in the letter that the young Timothy received when he received guidance from his elder:

17 As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. 18 They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, 19 thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

When I was 16 or 17 I heard my pastor preach about giving and how it really is a faith act. Bill Shephard testified to that last Sunday when he talked about God asking him and Liz to put God at the top of their budget rather than at the bottom where only the leftovers are given. It does take trust in God's provision for someone to give 10% of your income to the church. I heard my pastor talk about this and decided I'd give it a try, so I did. Cold turkey I started giving 10% of my paychecks to the church, and I found it exhilarating. It was risky but somehow I always had what I needed. It was both a gift of gratitude to God and a test of my trust in God. Did I really trust God to provide? God always did, and because I believe God will continue to provide, Lynn and I are increasing our giving for next year by 11.5%, which essentially means we are giving half of my anticipated raise because we have been blessed and are called to be a blessing to others. And this congregation is striving to grow and reach out to people in order to share the love, grace and mercy of Jesus Christ. We want to be part of that in a bigger way.

So this morning as Bill Shephard did last Sunday, I encourage you to consider tithing as an act of faith. If you can't start at 10%, then start at 1% and move forward until you eventually get there. If you have a difference in your household between spouses, then maybe consider your giving based on income you have control over. Each family has to work those things out so that it works for you.

Remember this isn't a salvation issue. In other words, God isn't going to be mad at you if you don't tithe. God isn't going to deny your entrance into heaven. It's not a salvation issue. God loves you as you are, irrespective of your giving.

Having said that, though, do you want to be part of sharing the good news with children that God is crazy about them and wants--as Jesus told his disciples—the children to be allowed

to come? Do you want your giving to express the fact that, like Abraham, you have been blessed by God and you want to be a blessing to someone else? Do you believe that showing hospitality to our neighbors by offering food without cost or expectation is loving them as we love ourselves? Are you concerned that we build relationships with people we don't know yet in order to embrace them with the genuine love of Christ so they too will receive the life that really is life? Do you really want this church to grow? Then by all means consider tithing or moving toward it. If you can't tithe then start somewhere and see how it goes. Or if tithing is a concept that just doesn't resonate with you, then take a look at the back of the giving card and find where you are now in your giving and consider stepping up to the next level. If you aren't giving anything now, take the first step and begin giving something. Everyone can give something, even if it's only a dollar a week. Give something.

For Jacob, building an altar was an expression of worshipping God and giving was an ongoing act of worshipping the God who promised to be with him no matter what. As with Jacob, our giving is a way of simply saying, "Thank you, and I trust you, Lord." When we give from the heart, it is an act of offering gratitude to God for all the blessings with which we've been blessed. It is also a concrete way of being a blessing to others. That in itself is a gift.