

“Giving Until the Job is Done”

Exodus 35:4-10,20-22a,29; 36:2-7 (NRSV)

By John Gill

This morning, we are continuing our series of sermons on Stewardship, entitled, “Generous.” During these weeks, we all are being asked to prayerfully consider the level of our giving to our congregation in this new year.

Last Sunday, our sermon featured the “Hokey Pokey” to illustrate that we should “put our whole self in” God’s hands – not just bits and pieces of who we are. We learned the dangers of trifling with, or playing-games with God. God wants us to be fully-devoted-followers-of-Jesus in all areas of our lives.

In considering our scripture text for today, I was hoping I could figure out a way to get you out of your pews again this morning, and do a “Conga Line,” - but you’ll be relieved to know that I thought better of it! Although - we ALL could use a little more physical exercise, I’m sure! I know I could!

This morning’s lesson is part of the story of the Exodus. I’m sure you are familiar with the first portion of the Book of Exodus depicted in the famous movie, starring Charlton Heston. The descendants of Jacob (who were also known as “the Israelites”) were dramatically delivered from their Egyptian slave-masters when God miraculously drove back the waters of the sea so they could cross to safety on dry ground. For most of us, that’s about as much as we remember about the story of Exodus – but there is a lot more to the Book of Exodus than that. What happens between the parting of the sea and our text this morning? Bear with me for a few moments as I fill in the gaps:

Once the waters of the sea returned and drowned Pharaoh’s army, the Israelites were free, but they found themselves in a desert wasteland, without water or food, unsure of their future. Their ultimate destination was the “Land Flowing with Milk and Honey” that God had promised their ancestor, Abraham – and they probably expected to make a bee-line for the Promised Land. Little did they know it would take them 40 years of wandering in circles in the desert before they would ever reach their goal.

Why 40 years? That’s a long time! Because God knew that this rag-tag assembly of former slaves were not yet prepared or equipped to create a brand-new nation – a society with faithfulness-to-God as its organizing principle. They were not yet a community who shared a common purpose. They had a lot to learn, and God had a lot to teach them before they could really be called, “God’s Chosen People.”

So, through Moses, God leads them to Mt. Sinai, where God gives Moses the Ten Commandments and other laws, and instructions on how they are to establish their new God-centered society. But right away, things go wrong! Even while Moses is up on the mountain receiving the Law of God, the people down in the valley have fashioned a golden calf – an idol to a pagan god. Picture it! The very moment God is giving his Ten Commandments and preparing to establish an eternal covenant with the Israelites, they have already rejected him. So much for a God-centered society! It became obvious that it’s going to take a long time for them to learn to be faithful to God and to trust him completely.

If you read this part of scripture, it is clear that it is God’s greatest desire to dwell in the midst of his people. But because of their disobedience and sin, God declares that he cannot take up residence

among them. He says, (33:3) “Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.” God is pure and holy, and cannot dwell among a sinful people.

In reality, God doesn’t completely desert them. But he does keep his distance. You see, even at this early stage in Jewish history, there was a “sacred tent” set up in the camp of the Israelites. It wasn’t meant to be a gathering place of public worship. It was a place to go to meet God – to have an audience with God himself. As it says in 33:17, “Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp; he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the Lord would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp.” The text makes it very clear: This “Tent of Meetings” was on the outskirts of the encampment.

Now, this Tent of Meeting was the precursor to the Tabernacle that is the subject of our scripture that was read this morning. However, at this stage, this tent was not the “dwelling of God” – it was just a place to meet with God. As I said, it was God’s hope that the Israelites, his chosen people, might demonstrate such faithfulness that God would be able to make his home in their midst, right in the center of the camp – right in the hearts of the people. But because of their sinfulness, that wasn’t possible. Things certainly were not going according to plan!

But then, according to chapter 34 of Exodus, Moses intercedes, and pleads for God’s mercy on behalf of the people – and God gives the people the chance to redeem themselves.

What must they do? They must fashion a Tabernacle, a new “Tent of Meeting,” following the strict instructions God had given to Moses. It was a test! If the people would faithfully work together and construct the Tabernacle, and place it at the center of the camp, then God promised that he will take up residence there in their midst, and be their guide on their journey. Then, God will be their God, and they will be his people.

And that’s where our text picks up the story with the fashioning of the Tabernacle.

This command of God will require a great deal of effort and attention to detail – God’s instructions that must be strictly followed. It will require a level of cooperation and community-effort they had not yet demonstrated they were capable of. Are they up to it? Will this motley band of stiff-necked people rise to the occasion? Will they demonstrate a level of faithfulness and purity that will allow God to reside in their midst? Can they work together as a team to accomplish this task? OR – Will they screw it up?

Well, it’s clear from our text that they did NOT screw it up. They redeemed themselves. The task was undertaken, and was accomplished in spectacular fashion. And because of their faithfulness and dedication, God took up residence in the Tabernacle, right in the very heart of his people!

Why - you might be wondering, would the preacher choose this particular story from the bible for this series of sermons on stewardship? What does it have to do with us?

When I came across this passage in my personal devotions, I immediately heard God say to me – preach on this, because Sebastian United Methodist needs to take to heart the lessons this text teaches. So, what can we learn from this story? I think two things – one lesson for us personally, and one for us as a congregation:

Personally, what is this story teaching us? I think this: **God wants to be at the center of your life.**

Before I explain, let me first offer a disclaimer: I'm not suggesting that any of us have worshiped a "golden calf" or a pagan god. We have not been outright rebellious against God (at least, I hope not!) – in fact, I believe most of us strive to put God first in our lives, and corporately to put God at the center of our church. However, the truth is we are not always faithful. You and I do idolize things we shouldn't – things that take the place of God in our hearts. We are all prone to sin, individually, and I'm sure, as a congregation.

You and I must always be on our guard against sin. We must repent of any sinfulness that keeps God on the fringes of our lives, and instead, invite him in to the center. But to make that possible, we must build him a tabernacle in our hearts so that God can "take up residence" there and reign supreme.

Constructing the Tabernacle is really a metaphor for making our hearts ready to receive the Spirit of God. So, what kind of preparations are you making so that God can be "at home" within you? Have you spent your whole life pushing God "outside the camp" of your life, keeping him at arm's length? What modifications to your life do you need to make so that God might come in, and live in your heart? What do you need to clear out from the "center of the camp" of your heart in order to make room for God?

The message from this passage of scripture you and I need to hear loud-and-clear is this: It is God's most passionate desire to take up residence at the center of our lives, and in our hearts – but our sin and unfaithfulness has expelled God – pushing him to the fringe – "outside the camp." To make things right, we must repent. Like Moses, we must plea for God's mercy and forgiveness, and invite God to move from the outskirts of our lives into the very center of our hearts, and dwell there. Only then is it possible for us to know the presence and power of God in our lives.

So that's the lesson each of us should personally learn from this text. But what is this text saying to us as a congregation – as it relates to "stewardship" and our theme of being "Generous?" It is this: **It is in working together to accomplish the goals God sets for us that we can experience the presence and power of God in our church. And this is only possible when our "hearts are stirred" to generosity, and our "spirits are willing" to serve.**

To accomplish this task would require TWO things: 1) that all the people give generously; 2) and that we all use our skills to serve, offering our time and talents for God's glory.

In the text we read, the call went out – bring materials for the construction of the Tabernacle as an offering to the Lord – a free-will offering (there was no compulsion or tax). And people overwhelmed the craftsmen with their gifts! So much so, that they had to be told to STOP giving!

And then, the call went out for skilled craftsmen/women to do the work – and enough stepped forward to accomplish the task. Again, no compulsion to serve – but all volunteered eagerly, and with joy!

Did you notice in the text we read, there is something of an ostinato - a refrain repeated over and over – lest we miss it:

"Let whoever is of a generous heart bring the Lord's offering...,"

"they came, everyone whose heart was stirred, and everyone whose spirit was willing...,"

"men and women whose hearts made them willing to bring...,"

"everyone whose heart was stirred to come and do the work..."

The people were able to accomplish the goal – because their “hearts were stirred,” and their “spirits were willing.” And, did you notice the last line of our scripture: “So, the people were restrained from bringing; for what they had already brought was more than enough to do all the work.” - more than enough! Wow! That’s not a phrase we often hear in the church!

Friends, this is a word for us at Sebastian United Methodist this morning. As you heard last Sunday from Diann Flanigan in her report about our financial situation, our congregation has had to dip into our reserve funds every year for a good number of years in order to fund the cost of operating our congregation. Even with the generous support of our Thrift Shop, that funds nearly 1/3 of our annual budget, we still have had to dip into savings – to the tune of \$30,000 in 2019. This cannot continue. If we are going to have a stable future as a congregation, we have to increase our income from all sources, INCLUDING increasing the level of our giving, starting today! We all must “step up” our giving to the General Ministries Fund so we can return to solvency. And we must also increase our level of serving, with more of us volunteering to participate in the ministries of our church, including our Thrift Shop, to demonstrate a higher level of stewardship of our time and talents dedicated to God. I hate to be so blunt, but that is our reality.

Later this month, you will have an opportunity to complete an “estimate of giving” card indicating how generous you plan to be going forward. And today you will find a volunteer sheet in your bulletin I hope you will complete, indicating interest in areas of service you might like to give. As you leave you can hand them to an usher by the doors.

Just as he did with the Israelites, God has presented us with a test. Our test is to fully fund his church.

This command of God will require a great deal of commitment and focus from all of us – It will require a level of cooperation and community-effort. Are we up to it? Will we rise to the occasion? Will we demonstrate a level of faithfulness that will allow God to be glorified? Can we all work together as a team to accomplish this task? OR – Will we screw it up?

It sounds like an insurmountable task. But no more insurmountable than God’s command to the Israelites to construct a Tabernacle in the middle of the desert! The Israelites – slaves who had escaped to freedom with only their most meager possessions and barely surviving in a desert wilderness, were nonetheless able pull together and accomplish their goal – Why? because their “hearts were stirred,” and their “spirits were willing.”

Church, if the Israelites could accomplish their goal – there’s no reason we can’t accomplish ours! We have far more resources than they had to give. And we have hours we can volunteer to serve and skills we can use for God’s glory. All it takes are “stirred hearts” and “willing spirits.”

Is your heart stirred to give? Is your spirit willing to serve? I hope so. Because, if they are, then God promises that we will accomplish the goal God has set for us – and he will come and take his rightful place at the very center of our church, and live among us, just as he promised.

Then he will be our God, and we will be his people.

May it be so. Amen.