

A Life of Giving

Sterling UMC
October 24, 2010
Romans 12:1-5

Have you ever done the hokey pokey? You remember that little song and dance don't you? It used to be a very popular around my house. It goes, "You put your right hand in, you take your right hand out, you put your right hand in and you shake it all about. You do the hokey pokey and you turn yourself around. That's what it's all about." Then it continues with the left hand, the right leg, the left leg, and head. It's an active and sometimes tiring little exercise that finally ends with this command, "You put your whole self in, you take your whole self out, you put your whole self in and you shake it all about. You do the hokey pokey and you turn yourself around. That's what it's all about."

This morning on this commitment Sunday as we come to the end of our "Get out of the Boat" series, and as we hear these words from Romans 12 my mind flashes back to that little song and dance. You see when it comes down to it, when we talk about stewardship and what the Lord asks of us, he doesn't want just part of us. He doesn't want our right hand or left hand; he demands that we put our whole selves in. That's what it's all about.

"I urge you, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship."

What Paul is saying is: "Take your whole body, your whole self, the tasks and activities that are a part of your daily life – your work, your leisure, your time, your talents, and your treasures – take whatever is a part of your life and offer it as an act of worship to God. This is to be a living sacrifice to him without any reservations!" In other words, real worship isn't merely the offering of elaborate prayers to God. It isn't merely the singing of majestic hymns of praise to his name. It isn't merely inspiring liturgy or splendid ritual. It isn't merely placing a check in the offering plate as it passes by. Neither is it something that takes place in church. Real worship sees our every thought, word, and deed offered unto God as act of worship.

Now that's a tall order, and for some that call can be frightening, it can make us hesitant. Perhaps our immediate response might be, "That's easy for you to say, Paul, but you go ahead and do it."

The fact is Paul did just that! He wasn't one to stand back and give orders he wasn't willing to carry out himself; he was ready to jump right in to experience a particular life situation and then encourage others to follow his example.

So how can we do that? How do we give ourselves as living sacrifices to the Lord? What does it require of us?

As we read on Paul tells us it requires two things. First he says, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world."

I really like the way J. B. Phillips in his contemporary translation of this statement puts it. He says it this way, "Do not let the world press you into its mold."

Martin Luther, leader of the Protestant Reformation in Germany, had an expression in German: "Wurde was du bist"; that is, "Become what you are." For the

Christian the normal course of events is for the inward life to transform the outward. In the endless pressure of our world, however, often the opposite happens to the believer. Our outward behavior often conforms to the world rather than to our true inward nature.

This world in which we live exerts a tremendous force on us. Society is constantly trying to mold us and shape us into its image. We are constantly bombarded with images of the “good life.” Buy this car. Build that house. Wear those clothes. Drink this beverage. Eat at this restaurant. Land that job. Before we know it we succumb to these pressures and the world has squeezed us into its mold.

Nowhere can this become more obvious than in the dimension of Christian giving. Whereas John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, said, “Make all you can, save all you can, give all you can,” many professing believers say today, “Make all you can, keep all you can. Spend all you can.” Sadly we have become a very greedy, self-centered people. We want more and more. We’re never satisfied. We must keep up with the Jones’. For some material possessions become the most important thing in their life. And that is another way of saying that money has become our God.

Someone has noted that it is ironic that Americans take the motto, “In God we trust” and put it on our money, because if there is any people who trust in their money as much as they do their God, it is we.

Now I’m not saying that there is anything wrong with working hard and earning a good living and providing for our families. But what I am saying is that we must be very careful not to let this consume us. If we are not careful we can fall right in that trap. And before we know it the world has us pressed right into its mold.

Take our giving for example. The startling truth is that the average Christian gives about 2% of personal income to the work of Christ. This is far, far behind the amount spent on housing, food, clothing, transportation, and recreation. The average Christian gives about \$1 per day to the work of spreading the Gospel over the globe. That is less than the price of a Coke at McDonalds.

The chameleon is an interesting lizard. It changes its color to match the background. Place the chameleon on green and it turns green. Place the chameleon on brown and it turns brown. At the point of giving, there is really no place for Christian chameleons. If we offer ourselves as living sacrifices our attitude toward material possessions must change. We must reflect the values of God’s kingdom rather than the values of this world. We must be thermostats that set the temperature around us rather than thermometers that merely reflect it.

This leads us to the second thing that is required for us to offer ourselves as living sacrifices. Paul says, “Be transformed, by the renewing of your mind.”

The opposite of the pressure into the world’s mold is a life of transformation. When Paul uses those words, “Be transformed,” in the Greek it is the word metamorphosis. This means not a change in the external scheme of things, but a change in the essential nature of the person, beginning on the inside and working its way to the outside.

A key to understanding this is the transfiguration of Jesus Christ. When Jesus went up to the mountain with Peter, James, and John, the Bible tells us that a change took place in the appearance of the Lord. A transformation took place that permitted the essential internal deity of the Christ to shine forth from the humanity of the Galilean

carpenter. This is a perfect illustration of the transformation implied by Paul in Romans 12. He exhorts believers to demonstrate in the outward observable aspects of life that inward transformation that we have experienced in Christ.

The biological process of metamorphosis or transformation takes place when an ugly caterpillar spins a cocoon around itself and, after that, emerges as a beautiful butterfly. For a human being who has lived in self-absorption, materialism, greed and possessiveness suddenly to turn to the other person – to the spiritual, the generous, and the giving – is no less a miraculous transformation. This comes only by the grace of God and living empowered by the Holy Spirit.

The sun gives off light because it shines; the rose exudes fragrance because it is a rose. The fruit tree does not transform the bud into the flower and the flower into the fruit by some extraordinary effort of self-transformation. It is the very nature of the tree because of its internal life to produce the fruit. The same is true for transformed living in the Christian dimension. When we give the Lord our hearts and lives a transformation takes place. “Old things pass away, all things become new.” That transformation takes place from the inside out. It starts on the inside as we begin to allow the Lord to cleanse and purify our hearts and renew our minds and it works its way out in a change in our behavior and habits. This happens as surely as dawn follows the darkness of night.

This is most certainly true in the arena of stewardship. Transformed living leads to transformed giving. What we do with our time, talent and treasure is an accurate barometer to the degree our lives have been transformed by the power of the Gospel.

Nothing so demonstrates the tangible change in our lives brought about by Christ as the willingness to give.

Only the transformation of life into the giving life of the Gospel releases me from that earth-bound grasping to the heaven bound giving that characterizes the life of Christ.

You see the transformed life is the giving life. All of nature witnesses to that fact. The withered and dehydrated seed falls into the ground. There, a strange, wondrous transformation takes place. The seed moistened by the damp soil, disintegrates as the life-essence within the seed germinates. Soon that seed becomes a shoot. That shoot becomes a stalk. That stalk produces a beautiful flower. The flower in turn produces another seed. It belongs to the wonder of nature that such a miracle takes place. In the giving up of itself to the process of germination, that seed is transformed into new life. The life that gives is the life that lives. Our life transforms into money. That money transforms into ministry. That ministry transforms again into life. The circle is complete.

It is our tragedy that there is so often some part of our lives, some part of our activities, some part of ourselves which we do not give back to Christ. Somehow there is nearly always something we hold back. We rarely make the final sacrifice and surrender. You see I believe that when we talk about stewardship we are talking about more than money. We are talking about everything in our lives, our entire being.

In a few moments we will be inviting you to fill out the cards that you have received. This will indicate your response to our Get Out of the Boat campaign. You will be making a commitment. But I want you to understand something; this is your commitment to God, and it is between you and God. It is not something that this church is going to use to shame, or coerce, or pressure you. Our financial secretary is going to

tally the results and we will announce the results. And from there it is up to you to honor your commitment in the light of God's grace.

So that leaves us with the ultimate question. How much should you give?

Years ago a pastor was approached by a man wanting him to figure exactly what a tithe of the man's income should be. The pastor said wisely, "Mr. Anderson, I am not interested in helping you figure what your tithe is. Every time you figure, God loses. Excuse me, I have something more important to do." The man left, but the seeming rebuff kept eating at him. Finally he came back and told the pastor how he felt. "I knew you'd come back, Brother Anderson," said the pastor. "I wanted to tell you that it's not Jim Anderson's tithe that God wants. He wants Jim Anderson. He wants you to give yourself to him."

I'm here to tell you that God doesn't so much care about your 2% or 3% or 5% or even 10%. He wants 100%. He wants the living sacrifice. Nothing else will do. God doesn't want your money. He wants your heart. He wants your soul. He doesn't want anymore "hokey pokey", putting ourselves in and taking ourselves out. He wants us to give ourselves to Jesus Christ who will turn our lives around. That's what it all about. And when we do that, when we place ourselves completely in his hands then everything else, all the rest will take care of itself.

What limits shall we put on our giving? What are you putting in? What are you taking out? What gifts do you have to offer today? Is it your time, your service, your money, your talents, your heart? May this day we be able to echo the words of St. Bernard of Clarevaux, "Lord, I have but two mites, a body and a soul; I give them both to thee."