

# **The People Give**

Exodus 35:1-9, 21

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2 November 2014

Moses assembled the people together to tell them that God was going to dwell with them in a tabernacle, a place of meeting. God was going to provide a special place where they could encounter God. All of this was part of God's plan to form them into a new community, who would live differently, and bring salvation to the world.

But the tabernacle did not appear miraculously, rising out of the desert floor. It had to be built. The people were, themselves, required to prepare the place.

They began by giving. These who had been enslaved and were newly free. Who were struggling at times with thirst and hunger. Who were experiencing the hostile weather and environmental conditions of the Sinai peninsula, they gave.

Their donations would be used to construct the tabernacle. Their giving was an act of thanks-giving and worship. It was an investment in hope and the future. It was one of the spiritual practices that would help to form them as a people.

I too have learned from personal experience and the stories of those who taught me how the practice of giving itself shapes you into the kind of person God wants you to be.

Giving is something that my mother taught me. I've told you before how in our household we were paid our weekly allowance into four envelopes that my mother had created for us. One envelope was spending money, another envelope short term savings for something that we wanted to buy, the third was for our savings account at the bank, and the fourth was our tithe. Ten percent of the weekly allowance, dedicated to the church. It would be a mistake to list it as the fourth envelope, though, because it was really first. The tithe was paid before anything else was.

From the earliest age, then, I was a tither. It became a habit. A spiritual practice and discipline, the source of spiritual strength and joy.

When the stewardship campaign rolled around every year and the deacons and other folk stood up to talk about tithing, I knew what they were talking about. When they spoke of how it brought joy and blessing to their lives, I knew. When they talked about how it made them a better person more generous and gracious, I knew that too.

In 1990 my childhood church, the First Baptist Church of Miami, Oklahoma celebrated its centennial. Throughout the year, a number of long time church members shared stories about the earlier days of the congregation. Some were a little shocking. For instance, one of our oldest members, a short, elderly, white haired woman who was almost 100 herself, talked about one time when the Klan appeared during Sunday morning worship to donate money to

the church. According to her, the church gave the money away, refusing to keep it. Thank goodness.

Another testimony that has always stuck with me was told by Claudine Stepp. Claudine was asked to talk about the period in the 1960's when the church built the new sanctuary. Now the Stepps were not wealthy, you wouldn't even describe them as comfortable. But Claudine shared how her family decided to support the building of the sanctuary. They were already tithing and understood that a commitment to the building campaign would call for sacrifice beyond the tithe that God normally asked of them. They didn't give up some luxuries, because they didn't have any to give up. Instead they reduced the size of their weekly food budget and committed that money to the church. Claudine said it meant that they ate a lot of beans for a while, but as she stood there in the sanctuary almost thirty years later, she shined with pride that her sacrifice had contributed to a ministry which touched the lives of thousands of people. She spoke of this as one of the great joys of her life.

These are the sorts of stories that I grew up hearing, the sort of spiritual training that I received. Thus, I was always a tither.

In the late nineties when I started graduate school I worked as a graduate assistant in the philosophy department at the University of Oklahoma. That first year I made \$7,500. By my fifth year, thanks to President David Boren's commitment to raise our salaries, I was making \$12,500, plus health insurance. That seemed like a fortune compared to my first year.

All of those years that I lived below the federal poverty level, I still tithed to the church. Plus, I gave some extra money occasionally to other charitable causes. I was amused one year when there was a small scandal after Al and Tipper Gore released their tax returns. The Gore's had contributed only \$500 to charity. I was proud that I, who lived below the poverty level and made far less than the Vice President of the United States, had given away more money than he did that year.

One of the spiritual fruits that comes with tithing is learning to live simply. Learning to live with less means that we are less greedy, that we participate less in the injustices of the world economy, that we learn that we are not owned by our things. Sure, there are times when I've been envious of others and then things they possess. But I'm not envious of their credit card debt or their consumer mindset that compels them to want the latest or the best thing.

Instead, I look at what I've invested in over my lifetime. I've helped to save the lives of African children through medical missions. Provided relief after the Oklahoma City bombing, the Indian Ocean tsunami, the earthquake in Haiti. My gifts have supported micro-loans and libraries in the Mississippi Delta, helping people break out of poverty. I've built homes and hospitals and dug water wells for those without. I've educated new ministers who helped to spread the message of God's love. And my financial gifts have helped thousands experience profound moments of worship in the churches to which I've belonged. The fruits of my labor have helped to build the kingdom of God.

And when I look at this list of names of all those who have died this last year, I see so many good and faithful people. They were kind and generous, hard-working and determined, thoughtful and passionate. The fruits of their labor have helped to build the kingdom of God.

From my own story and the lives of these saints, I've discovered the truths contained in these ancient stories. And one of those truths is that we are transformed by our own giving, by our own participation in God work.

May the spirits of these blessed ones empower us  
in our giving and our working  
that God might be glorified.