

Wandering Home

^{NRS} **Luke 22:14** When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. ¹⁵ He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; ¹⁶ for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." ¹⁷ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; ¹⁸ for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." ¹⁹ Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

^{NRS} **James 1:2** My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; ⁴ and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing. ⁵ If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.

Wandering Home

Every now and then, you've heard me say that a lot of my sermons are the lessons I need to hear. This past week I was trying to pay attention to the messages of the past couple of weeks. Tuesday, I went to the Presbytery meeting. I have a low rigmarole tolerance level. Day-long meetings can feel like a quagmire, a lot of sound and fury, signifying nothing. And then, it happens - as it always does. We began to worship and we sang. Three hundred, four hundred, maybe five hundred voices lifted in song. It takes my breath away! *Praise Ye the Lord, the Almighty!* Praise indeed! *Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost!* People singing with feeling! Singing like their very soul just had to bust out and be heard! I heard great beauty.

It was a clear fall afternoon as I drove home on Wallburg-High Point Road. The engine was purring as the car danced gracefully through the curves. Firmly nestled in the seat, the feel of the road in the steering wheel was pleasantly communicating itself to my fingertips. It felt beautiful.

The sky was clear. The leaves were turning. It was a feast for the eyes. And when I came up behind a truck pulling a load of mulch, the rich scent filled the car. Waiting at home was a pot of homemade beef vegetable soup. Sight, scent, taste, sound, and touch. In the span of only a few hours, God's creation had flooded each of my senses with beauty. Praise God from whom all blessings flow!

Last Sunday we gave some thought to the gifts we have been given of time and aptitudes. During this past week I hope you have been thinking about how God has blessed you with various abilities that you can use to serve others - and that you have filled out your form and will place it in the basket this morning.

This morning the subject is money. Each time I attend a Presbytery meeting I'm reminded again how thankful I am that we're a connectional church. It's easy to get into a frame of mind where we cast presbytery as some sort of oppressive bureaucracy, because we're cynically disposed toward organizations in general. This congregation cannot run a church camp for youth - but together as a presbytery we can and do. Together with other congregations we have a campus ministry at several colleges and universities in this area. Part of the money we send to presbytery is used to start new congregations here in the piedmont of North Carolina. The most impressive thing I learned this time at the presbytery meeting was about our close ties with the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico and especially with the presbytery in the Mexican state of Chiapas. There are 400 congregations and 32,000 members in Chiapas. We send money, we send teachers to train ministers, and we're helping to build a medical clinic. Three people from our presbytery spoke about trips to Chiapas to help with training and construction. Many of the pastors in Chiapas learned to read and write after they became pastors. The call to serve the Lord is strong; the need for education and training is deep. The real needs of real people in Mexico are being met by real people working together in this presbytery. It's important to know that this is all just one piece in a mission effort that includes 207 mission workers in 50 countries. There is so much that we cannot do by ourselves, but that becomes feasible when we work together. And that takes money.

It takes money to do local mission work, as well. It takes money to keep the lights and the heat on at The Shepherd's Inn, at the food pantries in town, and at this facility where we learn, worship, and gather for fellowship. This year, we provided a facility that was used by Habitat for Humanity, Al-Anon, the Red Cross Blood Drive, and the National Guard. By using this facility to host the event, the Thomasville Chili Cook-off raised almost \$ 4000 for local food pantries.

Some of you have heard somewhere in the past that you should give a tithe, ten percent of your income. You may have heard that if you give less than that to the church, then you're robbing God. The difficulty with this approach is that it can feel like you're buying a ticket for a seat on the salvation train headed for glory land. I'll say it clearly: Thinking that you can somehow buy your way into the kingdom of God is bad theology. Jesus never told us to tithe ten percent – on the net or the gross. He did tell a story about a man who fasted twice a week and tithed all of his income, but Jesus wasn't impressed. He said that the traitorous tax collector who was praying over in the corner, asking for God's mercy, was the one who would leave the temple forgiven that day. (Luke 18:9-14)

Or, you may have heard that the more you give the more God will shower blessings upon you. I don't know why people buy into that approach. You and I can both think of a lot of obviously evil people who are rich and some impressively faithful and righteous folks who are poor.

So how much should you give? Perhaps the answer is a bit more complicated and a bit more ambiguous than either of those two approaches. It's quite true that the old laws for the Israelites called for them to give one-tenth of all of their income to the Lord. That's clear in Leviticus 27:30-32. We all know some of the other laws. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment." (Matt. 5:21-22) Jesus also said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matt. 5:43-44) Time after time, Jesus says, "The law said such and such, but I say to you . . ." and he raised the ante each time. Can you begin to understand how this sentence would be completed? "The law said to give one-tenth of all your income, but I say to you . . ." So, you might ask, are you saying that Jesus wants us to give 12% or 15%? No, when Jesus added the "but I say" phrase, he called for a change in attitude. It isn't a matter of increasing the percentage, it's a matter of moving from a requirement to an attitude of generosity. It's a move from "how much do I have to give?" to "how much can I help? God has blessed me. How can I be a blessing to others? How can I be thankful?"

You heard Bill read the account of the Last Supper. It took place in the upper room just an hour or two before Jesus was arrested and taken off to be beaten and crucified. The words are familiar, but we tend to fail to notice one word in that account - the word "thanks." Jesus gave thanks for the bread and for the wine. He's about to be arrested. In less than twenty-four hours he'll die an excruciating death. And he's being thankful for bread and wine. Jesus is thankful for what is before him on the table. How thankful are we?

Paul was beaten, stoned, lashed, shipwrecked, and imprisoned. Yet he was continually giving thanks to God. Almost every letter that we have begins with Paul offering thanks. How thankful are we? When I was a child, we sang an old gospel song that said, "All to Jesus I surrender. I surrender all. Today, if we're honest with ourselves, we'd be more comfortable if the hymn "Just As I Am" really said, "Just as I am, please leave me be!" But the good news of the gospel is more challenging than that. Jesus keeps pushing us to open our eyes to others, to look beyond ourselves and our family, to move from "what can I get" to "what can I give." It's very difficult, but we can do it.

I go by to see Phil Oehler about once a week. The room is clean, but fairly bare. The most outstanding characteristic about the food is that it's healthy. Phil sits and waits - waits to be helped in and out of bed, waits for nursing attention, waits to get better so he can have the knee operation. I'd go bonkers. Phil is more godly than me. He waits with his gentle smile, thanking each person sincerely as they bring meals, medicine, or personal care. With absolute sincerity, he tells me, "God is good to me." Phil isn't delusional. No, he has a clearer vision of life than most of us - and it inspires me to be with him. Some of the men I know at The Shepherd's Inn exhibit that same kind of clear vision of life. All of their worldly goods have

been stripped away - and that has left their horizons uncluttered. Without the distractions most of us have, what is most important in life comes into better focus. They talk about their faith and their dependence on God - and they are thankful.

Cathy and I got an email this week from a friend back in Missouri. She has been a cancer survivor for about eight years. She wrote, "In early Sept I learned my cancer has come back in the same place that we were treating with chemo this spring. I had a clear scan in early June so I had the summer off. God is good." God is good. She is thankful. These folks that I've talked about are an inspiration to the rest of us. They're like the character Scrooge in *The Muppets Christmas Carol* singing, "Every night will end and every day will start - with a grateful prayer and a thankful heart!"

So here's what I've learned this week. Life is good. God is generous to me. Yes, I know that my IRA has shrunk, but I haven't had to skip any meals. Both the beauty of creation and the love of God's people surround me. I'm overwhelmed by God's generosity and I'll increase my pledge this year. I hope that you'll feel the compulsion to do the same.

Today, when you leave the parking lot, I suggest that you wander home. Don't go by your usual route. Meander a bit. Go off of your beaten path. Turn off on streets that you haven't been down in a while, or better yet, streets that you don't recall that you've ever driven down. Don't be in a hurry. Take some time with this. Drive past a deserted factory or two, but slow down to really look. Go down streets off of MLK or National Highway or Fisher Ferry. If there are areas that you generally avoid, make a point of going there this afternoon. In the story of the "Good Samaritan" the priest and the Levite crossed the road and passed by pain and ugliness on the other side, but Jesus didn't recommend it. Go through some place that you've avoided.

As you wander, pay attention to what you see. Leave the radio off. Don't discuss church news or the coming city election. You'll almost certainly drive whole blocks without passing a house where anyone has a 401k or IRA. You may drive past house after house where no one is employed. Look at the yards. Look at the cars. Look at the condition of the roof or the porch supports. What you won't see is the inside. You might talk with Carolyn Bennett about that. She does in-home interviews with people who apply for Habitat homes. She's seen holes in the ceiling, holes in the floor, windows that don't work, and so much more.

Then go home. Look at your yard and the place where you live. Begin to count your blessings. Roof. Window. Carpet. Heat. Air conditioning. Food. The old gospel song says, "Count your blessings. Name them one by one!" Don't do that. Don't count your blessings one by one. If you do, it'll take all afternoon. Count your blessings by the dozens. Dozens of shelter comforts. Dozens of friends. Dozens of CDs and DVDs. Dozens of hangers in the closet with clothes on them. Dozens of meals the past few weeks. Dozens of flowers and sunsets that have been there for you to enjoy in the past few months. Reflect on how generously you've been blessed in all kinds of ways. The Lord has been good to us. We have all that we need - and so much more! We're made in the image of God. That means that we are to reflect God's image, God's love, God's generosity to others. When others see us, how will they see Christ in us? Think about all that you saw and felt as you wandered home today. Think about how blessed you are. Pray for awhile. Give thanks to God for your blessings. Pray that God's love and mercy and generous Spirit will enter your heart. Then, with a full and thankful heart, fill out your pledge card. Amen.

^{NRS} **Leviticus 27:30** All tithes from the land, whether the seed from the ground or the fruit from the tree, are the LORD's; they are holy to the LORD. ³¹ If persons wish to redeem any of their tithes, they must add one-fifth to them. ³² All tithes of herd and flock, every tenth one that passes under the shepherd's staff, shall be holy to the LORD.

^{NRS} **Matthew 5:21** "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire.

^{NRS} **Matthew 5:38** "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;

^{NRS} **Matthew 5:43** "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.