

09.27.26 ~ Pentecost 18
“Offerings: Conditional or a Gift?”
The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Words of Stewardship

Exodus 25:1-9, 31-36 *The Message*

Pew Bible 67, 74

¹⁻⁹ God spoke to Moses: “Tell the Israelites that they are to set aside offerings for me. Receive the offerings from everyone who is willing to give. These are the offerings I want you to receive from them: gold, silver, bronze; blue, purple, and scarlet material; fine linen; goats’ hair; tanned rams’ skins; dolphin skins; acacia wood; lamp oil; spices for anointing oils and for fragrant incense; onyx stones and other stones for setting in the Ephod and the Breastpiece. Let them construct a Sanctuary for me so that I can live among them. You are to construct it following the plans I’ve given you, the design for The Dwelling and the design for all its furnishings.

The Lampstand

³¹⁻³⁶ “Make a Lampstand of pure hammered gold. Make its stem and branches, cups, calyxes, and petals all of one piece. Give it six branches, three from one side and three from the other; put three cups shaped like almond blossoms, each with calyx and petals, on one branch, three on the next, and so on—the same for all six branches. On the main stem of the Lampstand, make four cups shaped like almonds, with calyx and petals, a calyx extending from under each pair of the six branches, the entire Lampstand fashioned from one piece of hammered pure gold.

Leader: These Are God’s Words. People: Thanks be to God!

Words of Instruction

Luke 12:35-40 *NIV*

Pew Bible 905

Watchfulness

³⁵ “Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, ³⁶ like servants waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. ³⁷ It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. Truly I tell you, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them. ³⁸ It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the middle of the night or toward daybreak. ³⁹ But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁰ You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.”

Leader: These Are Jesus’ Words. People: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Generous God, we come to both worship and learn something new about our faith and our relationship. We thank you for the opportunity to do so, and we ask for the insight to study your word today and throughout the next week. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my strength, and my Redeemer. Help us to open up our hearts and resources to do as

you would have us do to further your kingdom here on earth. Please speak through this message and messenger. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Aren't you glad we are worshipping indoors today? With all the rain and cool fall weather, if we were like Moses, our tabernacle would be a tent! Or we would be in an amphitheater or outdoor temple setting in Galilee or Capernaum. Of course, it would be drier and hotter there, but the seats were made of stone, so they absorbed both heat of the sun and the cold of the winters. No pew cushions back then!

For the next couple of weeks, we'll be asking ourselves some gentle but necessary stewardship questions. Do our practices widen or narrow the path toward a more generous way of life? Have we reduced generosity to a financial transaction and blinded ourselves to other forms of generous giving around us? In addition to Benevolence, do we also offer ministries of time, love, caring, transportation, or fellowship? Stewardship should not be only a financial or an off-putting word in the church. It is not merely an annual message or a strategy for sustaining the church. Stewardship is a way that we participate in God's mission in the world. The offering plate was never meant to be the whole story. If we are to illustrate God's own generosity to other people who know him or might not know him, then we must acknowledge and nurture all types of generosity, like that of time, talents, and tithes.

As we look at different passages in both the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, let us learn more about our faith legacy, the people of Israel, Jesus' view of generosity, worship, and ministry, and about ourselves. Yes, it is the time we review and analyze our income and expenses, ministries and facilities, wants and needs, but let it also be a time of

vision and mission reengagement and recommitment. It is also a time of gratitude for our many blessings and resources. So do not be anxious; these messages, I hope, will open new conversations and opportunities to serve the Lord in multiple ways, as we each are able to do within and beyond our logical or supernatural means.

We start today with Exodus. God chose the people of Israel to be those he would dwell among, and although they had used altars or groves to create types of shrines during their journeys, there had not yet been a building or a temple for God's presence until these instructions. God gave Moses detailed specifications to build a Tabernacle to symbolize God's dwelling among them. Can you think of other words for Tabernacle in the old or new testaments? Tent of Meeting, Tent of Testimony, and Sanctuary (to indicate holiness) are a few. Today, it's Worship Center, Auditorium, or Chapel. Metals such as gold, silver, and bronze were to be used in the building design and décor, as was acacia wood for the construction of the actual building and for the ark. No one but Egyptians up to then made acacia wood boxes covered in gold, so we know that they were still in Egypt. One eminent scholar, Dr. Carmen Joy Imes, associate professor of Old Testament at the Talbot School of Theology of Biola University in La Mirada, California, has studied "Exodus through Egyptian Eyes" for over fifteen years! Although some scholars say these chapters of Exodus were written later after exile, her deep studies reveal that these details about the tabernacle were thoroughly Egyptian and had to be written not long after they occurred. All cloth was to be fine linen, goat's hair, ram skins, and hides of sea cows. Sea cows are now extinct but were actually "dugongs," gentle, slow-moving, vegetarian marine

mammals that live in shallow coastal waters, native to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Agaba. They look like fat seals but are cousins to the manatee.

Another requirement for the tabernacle was the golden lampstand, much like the one on the bulletin cover. Shaped like an almond tree, it looks like a modern menorah with flowers and branches, symbolic perhaps of the twelve tribes. The lamp was to run continually, serviced (refilled and wicks trimmed) by the priests morning and sunset. With no electricity, the oil in it provided light for the priestly functions performed before God. Around it on the walls would be tiled or painted wings of protection, depicting divine presence and care. Design details give importance to order, shape, color, texture, intricacy, and visual appeal; all this was to honor and represent God's creative energy worthy to be praised and worshipped.

These physical offerings of the people (for they were required to pay for its construction and upkeep) reflect a shift from God's "divine abode" where Moses met God in his holy place on Mount Sinai with the laws down to the desert nomadic tents of meeting to a more stable location, allowing the people to meet him in a glorious tabernacle and experience his divine presence. They also reflect a theological shift from an inaccessible deified God to a personal God housed in our own bodily temples through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. It is this God that the Gospel of Luke tells us to willingly wait to appear.

David Evans' vocal offering is a great place to start: "He will hold me fast." Keep this insert as an encouragement during times of fear or despair, knowing that Jesus loves you and provides for you. That song actually answers my sermon title question, are our offerings conditional,

required (as it sounds in the Exodus message), or are they freely given gifts of generosity? I might say both if I read both passages literally, but in my faith journey, it is clear that I tithe out of instruction and my faith-filled willingness to do so, not because God's love is conditional. I was taught to tithe my time, talents, and income as a child; over the years, I did see how God blessed my efforts. We are not, however, to tithe out of guilt or shame. I selected this Luke passage as a bridge because both have lampstands and lamps. Jesus' teaching here is to be ready; may there always be light for two reasons, so that we see him when Jesus comes again and that the thief will not break in and steal our blessings, joy, or faith.

This is the paradox between the two passages. Do we build the glorious tabernacle to honor God's presence? Or do we give generously to ministries that help us serve God and his kingdom? We do not build or maintain a sanctuary for ourselves even though we love it; it can be a place of holiness, safety, and encountering God's presence just as in Moses' day. But for our culture today, not as many young people find God in a particular space but rather in what they are doing for the kingdom or for the world at large. So, should those generous offerings given be spent on service and ministries? And as Luke writes, be ready, presentable, and dressed to serve so that we will be ready to receive Jesus. We are to live and to minister expectantly and not be miserly in preserving our wealth for some other day (you know those parables.) When a vetted ministry presents itself, we must be generous and faithful that God will provide all we need. Yes, we are to be responsible, frugal, and accountable to one another as the body of Christ and this

congregation; but also, we are to ask for the spiritual gifts of generosity to help us live out the other spiritual gifts of hospitality, love, encouragement, evangelism, faith, care, and teaching just to name a few. We'll continue these conversations so please be praying about your personal views of generosity and stewardship. We appreciate all you do here at United Baptist, so know that our love is also NOT conditional! Amen? Amen! ||

Please pray with me: Thank you Lord for the guidance you give us through your Scriptures each week. May we never forget that you have called us into relationship first, service second, and glory last. Help us to stay close to you through your word and your servants. Help us to obey, listen, and serve others. Transform our hearts, Lord, so that we may demonstrate your love and generosity to others every day. Help us to provide encouragement and resources to others as you bless us. Let us keep our eyes upon you and your mission. Be with us this week as we ponder this message and be in our council meeting as we review and conduct church business. I pray these things in Jesus' name, Amen.