

SEALED BY FAITH

Genesis 22:1-2, 15-18
Luke 12:13-21

*Our giving and serving are acts of stewardship,
worshipping the Giver more than the gift.*

A sermon preached by
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves
First United Methodist Church
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Advent is still two weeks away, but already the Christmas decorations are up in the stores, the commercials are playing on TV, and I've been hearing Christmas music.

So let me jump the gun, too, and remind you of one of my favorite Christmas stories, and probably one of yours, too: *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas* by Dr. Seuss. I love the Grinch because it is a story of grace and redemption, and it's also a pretty good generosity story.

You know the tale. The Grinch hates the Christmas celebration in Whoville with a passion because his heart is three sizes too small. So he decides that if he can steal all the presents and food that make the celebration so joyful, then Christmas will not come. He disguises himself as Santa Claus and empties out every Who house while they sleep on Christmas Eve. He takes all the Christmas stuff—presents, decorations, food, even the yule logs—up to the top of Mount Crumpit to dump it. Then he waits with evil anticipation for the shock when the Whos wake up on Christmas morning and all their presents are gone. But as the Grinch strains his ears to hear the sound of weeping, something unexpected happens. Let me share it with you in the wonderful and unique words of Dr. Seuss:

And he *did* hear a sound rising over the snow.

It started in low. Then it started to grow...

But the sound wasn't *sad*! Why, this sound sounded *merry*!

It *couldn't* be so! But it WAS merry! VERY!

He stared down at *Who*-ville! The Grinch popped his eyes!

Then he shook! What he saw was a shocking surprise!

Every *Who* down in *Who*-ville, the tall and the small,

Was singing! Without any presents at all!

He HADN'T stopped Christmas from coming! IT CAME!

Somehow or other, it came just the same!

And the Grinch, with his Grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow,

Stood puzzling and puzzling: "How could it be so?

It came without ribbons! It came without tags!

It came without packages, boxes or bags!"

And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore.

Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!

“Maybe Christmas,” he thought, “*doesn’t* come from a store.

Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more.”

...And what happened, then? Well, in Whoville they say

That the Grinch’s small heart grew three sizes that day.

And then the true meaning of Christmas came through,

And the Grinch found the strength of ten Grinches, plus two!¹

Following that moment of revelation and transformation, the Grinch returned all the presents, and the Whos included the Grinch in their Christmas feast. If that’s not a story of redemption and grace, I don’t know what is! The point is plain to see—it’s not the material things that truly bring us joy. Christmas is not material; it’s spiritual. We all know that.

In our sermons on generosity and stewardship, giving and serving, we have made the same point as Dr. Seuss. It’s not about the material things; it’s all about the spiritual life that we are growing with God. Using the little devotional booklet, *A Generous Life*, we talked about how we are **born to be generous**. We are created in the image of God, and God’s two defining characteristics are love and generosity. That’s how we are to live.

Our generosity is **grounded in gratitude**. God blesses us first. God gives us everything worth having in the world. Our best response comes, not out of a sense of obligation or duty or fear, but out of a sense of gratitude for the gifts we have already received.

We figure out our response to God through spiritual discernment. We pray about it, and God’s sends the Holy Spirit to guide us in our giving and serving. God’s will is **revealed in prayer**.

So today we are talking about making a commitment to God through the church. We will promise to give and to serve God through the church because that’s the kind of people we were created to be, and we are grateful, and we have prayed about it. So our decision today is **sealed by faith**. It is an act of worship. It’s tangible and practical and concrete, but above all it is a spiritual commitment.

If you have been reading our devotional booklet this week, you encountered some very challenging passages of Scripture. I want to remind you of them, because they all point to the central idea that I want to share with you today.

The first one is the rich man who came to Jesus seeking the way to eternal life. Jesus reminded him of the commandments, and the man said he had kept all those commandments from his youth. The Gospel of Mark says Jesus “*looked at him and loved him*” and then blew his world apart: “*You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.*”² The man was shocked, and he walked away devastated, because he was very wealthy. It wasn’t what he was expecting at all. But what Jesus said, he said in love. He wasn’t saying that everyone should give away all their possessions, but he could see that for this guy, that was the prescription for a healthy soul. Jesus could see the man was a pretty good rule-follower, but deep-down, he loved his stuff more than he loved his God.

In Luke, Jesus is approached by a man wanting to get Jesus to intervene in a family squabble over an inheritance. Jesus warned them against greed, reminding them that “*one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.*”³ Then Jesus told a parable about the man who had a great harvest. He planned to tear down his barns and build bigger ones to hold all his grain and goods. So far so good. That’s actually good stewardship. But the man made his mistake when he said to his soul, “Soul, you have enough stuff for years. Relax, eat, drink, and be merry.” He was becoming complacent and lazy, and God brought him up short: “*You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?*”⁴ You’ve heard the phrase, “You can’t take it with you?” Well, you can’t. So Jesus gives the punch line: “*So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.*”⁵ It’s not the treasure that’s the problem, it’s the poverty toward God.

Then finally, there’s the story out of Genesis where God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac as a test of faith. Let’s be real. This is a terrible story. Our God does not want human sacrifice. But the Canaanite peoples around the Hebrews were all sacrificing their children to the gods in hopes for rain and abundant harvests. Against that backdrop, the story makes more sense. It is actually a counterpoint to the prevailing practices in their world. It shows how different the Hebrew God is from the bloodthirsty deities of the indigenous tribes.

The point is, Abraham did not sacrifice Isaac. But he would have! His son was a special gift from God. But Abraham's faith was so strong that he was going to do whatever God asked him to do. In the end, God did not ask him to do that. Rather, God blessed Abraham for his faith: "*Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. ... by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.*"⁶ Talk about a turnaround story! From the confusion and fear and despair of thinking you had to sacrifice your only son, to the joy of a universal blessing—Abraham sealed the deal with his faith and obedience.

Three challenging stories, but one thought ties them together. **Worship the Giver, not the gift.** The wealthy man put his possessions above his response to God, and he was distraught when Jesus tried to separate him from them. The foolish farmer thought full barns were enough to guarantee a long and restful retirement, but it only lasted a few hours. Abraham, who had received Isaac as a miracle baby when he and Sarah were far too old to have children, could not get his head around why God would now want him to kill the boy God gave him.

These stories are our stories, aren't they? They're about us. We love our stuff. We love our security and comfort. We love our families above everything. These are all the gifts of God. But Scripture is consistent from beginning to end. These good things are gifts of God, but we worship only God. Worship the Giver, not the gift.

Larry Sykora drives this point home in our devotional book with a personal story: "Forty-four years ago, I went through an experience that would change my life forever. Our first child, who had lived a healthy three years of life, was diagnosed with acute lymphocytic leukemia. Only fourteen days after her diagnosis, that precious girl died in my arms, and I came face to face with the question, 'Who is it that you worship, Larry, the gift or the Giver?'"

Sykora goes on to say: "In Genesis, God asked Abraham the same question. God asked Abraham to decide who it was that he would worship, the Gift (Isaac) or the Giver (God). At various points in our lives, we will

all answer this question, and the answer will determine how we live life. Worshipping the gift will only make us bitter, angry, cold, and unhappy. Worshipping the Giver will make us loving, caring, generous, and compassionate.”⁷

Worshipping the Giver puts us in a relationship that gives perspective to life, gives us strength against our obstacles and losses, and gives us a treasure that never goes away. Here’s how you worship the Giver and not the gift:

- **You rely on faith.** Stewardship—giving and serving—is a spiritual process. It’s not about the amount of money you give. It’s not about how many ministries you sign up to do. It’s about how you grow your faith in the process. It’s not about the material world; it’s about the spiritual world, as Paul says, “*we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.*”⁸ We worship the Giver through faith.
- **You relinquish control.** Now there’s a hard one! But here’s the hard truth. It’s not about us. It’s not about what we have and what we want to do. It’s about what God wants—how God wants us to give, how God wants us to serve. We don’t worship the Giver by keeping a death-grip (literally) on our lives. We relinquish control to God, and that’s how we worship.
- **You realize life.** God wants us to have life in all its abundance. God wants us to have eternal life—which we begin now, but it lasts forever. God doesn’t want us to give and to serve just to make ourselves miserable. When we worship the Giver and not the gift, we get a proper perspective on life, and we make a breakthrough to a life that is real. It’s a breakthrough like the Grinch’s heart growing three sizes.

There has never been a more important time to worship the Giver and not the gift—to give and to serve the Kingdom of God. We are in a time of great anxiety. There are many reasons and many sources for this anxiety. One is that we are not sure what form the United Methodist Church will be taking in the near future. Last week, a large group met in Tulsa and declared that whatever happens at our next national meeting in May, there will be a split in the denomination. Our own bishop, among many others, has

admitted that he sees no way around a division. That raises our anxiety. Anxiety makes us want to pull back, to focus inward, to walk away. Why would we commit to a church that may be (most likely will be) in for some hard times?

I think it's because there is no more important time to be faithful than in the hard times. The best response we can make to the denominational turmoil is to make our church as strong and vital and dynamic as it can be. No matter what happens at the denominational level, our mission stays the same. The local church is where disciples are made, children taught, youth engaged, families strengthened, couples married, and saints buried. Our ministry is just as important as it ever has been. First United Methodist Church will still be in ministry next year and ten years and a hundred years from now. The best way we can weather any storm that comes is to make our local church as strong as it can be. That's why we're here today.

Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."⁹ This is where our heart is. We were born to be generous. We are grounded in gratitude. We have been led to this moment in prayer. And we will seal our commitment in faith. As you come today to tell God how you want to give and to serve in the next year, may God grow your heart three sizes. May God give you strength of ten plus two. May God bless you with the life God wants you to have—meaningful, joyful, purposeful, abundant, and eternal. Are you ready for that?

¹ Theodor S. Geisel, *How The Grinch Stole Christmas* (N. Y.: Random House, 1957), no page.

² Mark 10:21.

³ Luke 12:15.

⁴ Luke 12:20.

⁵ Luke 12:21.

⁶ Genesis 22:16-18.

⁷ Larry Sykora, "Whom Do You Worship?" *A Generous Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2019), 80f.

⁸ 2 Corinthians 4:18.

⁹ Matthew 6:21.