

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
September 27, 2020
Sermon by Pastor Bart Brauer
What are we giving toward?

—Exodus 35:20-29

One thing I have learned about congregational giving through the years is that we people need to know two things to be generous givers toward church: Why am I giving? And why are we giving? Let me explain. The foundation of why I am giving needs to be there if I'm going to give in a way that is pleasing to God. And we all want to give in a way that is pleasing to God. If I'm giving so God will forgive me, if I'm giving so I can earn God's love and acceptance, if I'm giving to be rewarded by fellow human beings, none of that is pleasing to God. If those are the reasons why I'm giving, I need to go back to David and get an education. In talking to God in Psalm 51, David speaks the truth: "You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." A heart crushed by its own sin but repaired through the grace and forgiveness of the Savior is the only kind of heart that can truly give as God desires. Again, according to David: "Then there will be righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings to delight you." That personal foundation of why I am giving has to be there. The offerings each of us brings to God, no matter what amount they are, are but small gifts to the God who gave us his Son, and through his Son, gave us eternal life.

With that personal foundation in place, there's also a group foundation, a collective foundation that has to be laid so we are encouraged to be generous givers toward church. Why are we giving? What are we giving toward?

There was a group effort going on in Exodus chapter 35 in the days of Moses. Listen to this: *Everyone who was willing and whose heart moved him came and brought an offering...All who were willing, men and woman alike, came and brought gold jewelry of all kinds: brooches, earrings, rings and ornaments. They all presented their gold as a wave offering to the LORD. Everyone who had blue, purple or scarlet yarn or fine linen, or goat hair, ram skins dyed red or hides of sea cows brought them. Those presenting an offering of silver or bronze brought it as an offering to the LORD, and everyone who had acacia wood for any part of the work brought it. Every skilled woman spun with her hands and brought what she had spun...The leaders brought onyx stones and other gems...They also brought spices and olive oil...All the Israelite men and women who were willing brought to the LORD freewill offerings.* Did you track that materials list for the project? Jewelry, precious metals, fine fabrics, animal skins, wood, gemstones, spices and olive oil. What in the world were they making? A Tent of Meeting, that's what they were making. A Tent of Meeting by God's command and by God's design. Atop Mount Sinai God showed Moses a pattern of what he wanted made and all that would be required to make it. Moses communicated all this to the people who had just come out of Egypt and through the Red Sea, and the people freely gave.

Generally speaking, we don't put jewelry into the offering plate. We don't load the plate with skeins of yarn, put genuine snakeskin boots in there or drape the plate with coyote pelts. Generally, we bring offerings of money, whether by tangible cash or check, or by intangible electronic giving. And just like the men and women who brought their skills to the making of the Tent of Meeting, we bring our skills along with our time and energy to the work that goes on at church.

There is a difference between the Tent of Meeting project in Moses' day and the work that goes on at our church. For the Tent of Meeting, God specified exactly what to bring, what to make, and how to make it. It was all laid out for them in detail. Our work is based on a general mission that Jesus Christ gave his church after he rose from the dead: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you...Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation...Preach repentance and forgiveness of sins in my name." Now, Jesus does specifically tell us what to do: baptize, teach, preach. But he does not specifically tell us how to do it. We make his general mission specific as we decide how we are going to do it in our place and in our time.

A few weeks back you should have received in the mail a 2020/2021 ministry spending plan for Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Tempe, Arizona. As you look through it, you might say, "God did not tell us we had to have a board of elders or a school board or a stewardship committee. God did not tell us we had to build these facilities or operate that school or call that number of workers or hire that number of staff." And you'd be correct. Those are decisions we have made through the years. We—and I'm including all those who have gone before us at Emmanuel—we decided to buy some of this property in 1959 and purchase the rest of the south end in 1978. We determined to build this sanctuary in 1963 and add to it in 1984. We opened a grade school in 1972 and built the courtyard classrooms in 1973 and then the first school buildings on the south end in 1991 and then a preschool building in 2013. We called people to serve as pastors and teachers along the way, and we hired and paid others to work as support staff. Certainly we prayed for the Lord's help and blessing, and we are very thankful he helped and blessed. But we did need to make the decisions about how we were going to carry out Christ's mission at a specific

time in a specific place. This spending plan reflects what we are doing together this year, and so this is what we are giving toward this year. Last year God enabled us to give \$992,225.35 toward the work we did together last year. Now we have new work to do, and new offerings to give.

Note from Exodus chapter 35 who were the ones giving. It's like Moses was trying to emphasize it by saying it over and over. *Everyone who was willing and whose heart moved him...all who were willing, men and women alike...all the women who were willing and had the skill...All the Israelite men and women who were willing brought to the LORD freewill offerings.* Yes, there were men and women, some of them wealthy, some of them maybe not so wealthy; some of them very skilled, some of them perhaps not so. But none of that was the focus. The focus for Moses and for God was willingness. A willingness to give to God and to participate in the group effort. And willing they were! In fact, in the next chapter Moses had to tell the people, "No more giving!" because they were giving more than enough of what was needed for the project.

That's really what congregational giving comes down to. It's about the willingness—yes, the eagerness—to give toward what we have determined to do together: our day-to-day, week-to-week, month-to-month work, and also projects that come along the way to help us do that work better. Like Deeper Roots, Higher Sights Phase 2. Our giving efforts toward Deeper Roots, Higher Sights Phase 2 began in earnest over a year and a half ago. We willingly made commitments to give toward the project. They weren't promises made with an oath. They weren't binding pledges. They were freewill commitments with the intention of giving a certain amount over and above our regular offerings. After over a year and a half, it's great to see how the willingness to make the commitments has been matched by the willingness to give. There's a new banner out in the courtyard that shows the latest progress on our giving. The green stands between \$600,000 and \$700,000. The actual number runs the same backwards and forwards: \$670,076. And that amount is over and above the nearly \$1 million given in regular offerings. Unlike Moses' plea, there's no plea yet for "No more giving!" But we have just as much reason as the Israelites did to give thanks to God for giving us the motive and the means to give.

Let's go back to just what the Israelites were making. The Tent of Meeting was a set up and takedown worship center. The wood was used for the frames. The yarn was used to make fine curtains, and some of the metal was made into clasps to fasten the curtains to the wooden frames. Animal skins were used as coverings over the tent. The facility was also called a tabernacle, a dwelling place, because God was going to dwell there. So, they made a wooden chest, the ark of the covenant, and overlaid it with gold. They made a wooden cover for the ark, called the atonement cover, and overlaid that with gold too, and they hammered out two golden cherubim, two angels, with their wings stretched over the middle of the cover. Right there between the cherubim is where God would dwell and meet with the Israelites. There was a service connected to the place. Oil lamps, incense altar, altar for burnt offering, wash basin, and so forth. There was a high priest to oversee all the service at the temple. He wore an ephod that had a breastplate on it with twelve precious gems representing the twelve tribes of Israel. We could go on with all this, but the important point to be made is that the tabernacle was a place of service. A place where the priests served God, yes, but even more a place where God served his people by giving them commands and decisions, and most of all, by providing atonement for them. Blood was offered on the altar outside, and it was brought inside by the high priest and sprinkled on the atonement cover of the ark to make atonement for the people. It was a pre-picture of what Jesus Christ was going to do: offer himself as a sacrifice for sin and bring forgiveness for sinners before God himself.

The ministry center we are working toward has an important purpose too. Hopefully you have seen the mission statement for the ministry center. It's on the banner, it's on the regular updates that appear in our bulletin and on the website. A ministry for the Lord's work, providing Christian training and encouragement for people of all ages. Those two words—training and encouragement—are very important; they summarize the whole project. Training. We will be offering our time there to listen to the Word of God in adult Bible class, in teen Bible study, in Sunday School, in catechism, in vacation Bible school, and in our elementary school. We will hear presentations from special speakers. Listening to the Word of God there and hearing the message of his saving love will grow our faith, for faith comes from hearing the message. Through the Word we will also be equipped and trained for Christian living. Encouragement. We will be offering our time there to encourage one another at fellowship gatherings, suppers, funeral meals, wedding celebrations, school graduations, baby showers, you name it. It will be a place of meeting. A place where God meets us with his Word, and a place where we as God's people meet with each other for our encouragement and joy in the faith. That is a project we are giving toward together.

May God be gracious to us and forgive our sins. May he give us generous hearts and the will to carry out the work we have set out to do together. *Everyone who was willing and whose heart moved him came and brought an offering to the LORD.* Amen.