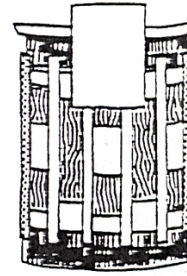


"Celebrating Our Gifts"
Rev. Dr. David E. Gray
Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church
October 21, 2012 - Stewardship Sunday
Deuteronomy 14: 22-29



from the
BRADLEY
HILLS
PULPIT

I find myself increasingly spending time attending children's birthday parties. I went to two yesterday afternoon. Each time a child in one of my kids' classes has a birthday all the kids are invited. They seem to travel in packs to them. Sometimes the parties conflict with lessons, commitments or other family plans and we cannot go but we try to. I have noticed that very often these parties revolve around gifts. Kids bring gifts for the birthday child. Children open gifts, and then they play with some of the gifts. Someone writes down a list of who gave the gifts. Then the guests who brought the gifts sometimes leave with their own gifts, goody bags to bring home. Then they learn to write thank you notes for the gifts.

But as we get older we don't celebrate our gifts as often. Maybe at baby showers, but the focus is on gifts for kids. Adult birthday party invitations often say "no gifts please." We rarely play with presents at adult birthday parties and I don't know when they last time was when I got a goody bag from an adult party.

Maybe we should celebrate the gifts we give and have been given as adults as well. Maybe we can learn from our children about the joy of celebrating our gifts.

When we hear about the Biblical concept of the tithing, a word which translates as 10%, it doesn't sound like fun. We put it in the obligation category, and we get that from discussions of tithing in the books of Leviticus and Numbers. And yet in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses reveals a different way of thinking about giving, even tithing. One of celebration. Listen now to God's Holy word.

Come Holy Spirit Come. Open to us the meaning of your word and the depth of your love for us. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

Several centuries ago, a rabbi named Hofetz Chaim lived in Poland. When an tourist went to see him, he was surprised to see that the Rabbi had only a chair, a table, and a few books. The tourist asked, "Where is your furniture?" The rabbi reportedly responded by saying, "Where is your furniture, my friend?" The visitor said, "But I am only a tourist passing through." To which the rabbi replied, "So am I." The concept of stewardship holds that we are all just tourists passing through here on earth. That what we have comes from God and we steward it by investing in ways that further the kingdom of God.

One of the most creative stewardship or financial campaigns I have heard of in awhile is succeeding by bringing in lots of tourists. You might have heard of the church of the Santuario in Northeastern Spain. Last month even Saturday Night Live did a story on the church. The church has a famous piece of art, a centuries old fresco of Jesus, called "behold the man." The fresco was showing its age and so a well intentional member of the church used a paint brush to paint on the fresco and fill in the fading parts. With apparent permission from the pastor and like Jack Nicholson's Joker character in the first Batman movie she was trying to "improve the art." What she did was make it so the fresco no longer looks like Jesus so it's been called "behold the monkey" now. The upside however, is that the tourism to the church has exploded. So many people have flocked there to see it that they have been able to charge a large admission price for people to see the fresco now. It has transformed not only the finances of the church but the entire town.

We have been trying to be creative as a church as well given recent financial pressure, but we haven't found a way for Bradley Hills to become an international tourist attraction yet. We are working on it. 😊 Our building is a resource for our community but needs to be maintained. And in September, we learned that Suburban Hospital, which has rented parking from us since 1998, has made a business

decision to stop using our space. That is a \$33K change to our budget. And so we as a community must step up for our ministry to remain as strong as it's been in the past. To do that we need to celebrate our gifts.

Writer Tony Compolo argues that our passage from Deuteronomy expresses the idea that tithing is about celebration.ⁱ That God's people were to take 10% of whatever they produced during a year, bring it to the temple, but not just drop it off and walk away, they were to celebrate first. That in Deuteronomy 14, Moses "took an ancient and universal law and made it a thing of joy as well as generosity."ⁱⁱ The bringing of a 10th of the Gross National Product of Israel to Jerusalem once a year would lead to celebration, dancing, and singing.ⁱⁱⁱ That is a lot of resources to party with. No wonder King David could shout with joy and praise in Psalm 138.

If it was too far for the people to haul all the goods to the market, they were to convert the grain into money and use that for celebrating where they are. The Israelite paying the tithe gave a feast to celebrate that they had gifts that they could return on God's behalf to build up the kingdom.^{iv}

Moreover, Moses shows a social conscience.^v Everyone was invited to the party. Moses said that the poor should be cared for and included. Once local places of worship closed and Levites or priests needed help, they were included. Orphans, widows, tax collectors, everyone was included.

Compolo suggests that the purpose of the annual stewardship party is to remind God's people that the kingdom of God was about celebration. That God will be our host at an eternal party someday. That like a larger communion meal, this stewardship party was to be a foretaste of the heavenly banquet God has prepared. After all, Jesus in Matthew 22 and John in Revelation 19 compare the kingdom of God to a wedding celebration.

The people of Israel worked hard all year so that when they brought their resources to God they could celebrate. We work hard for what we

have too. So next Sunday, on Dedication Sunday, we should celebrate that we are able to make a gift, a pledge of our resources, to help build up the kingdom of God here at Bradley Hills. Because that is what the church does. It builds up the kingdom. It provides roots and a safe haven in a challenging world. It changes lives by comforting, serving and teaching. It brings out the best in each of us by calling us to our potential as Christ's disciples. The church is where the story of God's love continues to be shared through the generations and acted out by God's people.

Most mornings I walk my son, Andrew, to his bus stop. And as he gets on the bus I tell him "I love you." I don't usually get a response but that's ok; it's early in the day and in life. I love this church too. I was telling the Session on Tuesday that I wake up excited to go to work and to be in ministry with you. Because you are a wonderful group of people. Active, engaged, smart and kind. And you love this church. I see how you love it and care for it.

But love is not free. Loving kids by raising them is hard work. It's costly in time, money and energy to say the least. But I do it because I love Andrew and his siblings. We have to give to the things we love.

Your love for this church is not free. It costs something. If we are to build up and pass on what we know about the kingdom of God then we must pledge to the church.

But we can do so in celebration at Bradley Hills. At a time when most churches in our area are contracting our membership continues to grow. This can be seen most clearly with our children's and youth programs, where this fall we doubled our offerings for children and families, split our infant and toddlers room into two groups, and are about to split our junior and senior high school group into two groups because there are too many kids in each group. We have 20 youth in our confirmation class currently, and some of our children's classes, like our 3-4 year olds class, have 20 children in them on Sundays. Our growth is a challenge

because our children and youth program now requires twice as many volunteers this year as last. But you are stepping up because you love this church.

We can see what this church will become as these children and youth grow up if we invest in it. But in order to have quality youth mission trips, young adult programming, and discipleship small groups to grow our church, we need to be able to afford a full time associate pastor again. As we look to hire our next associate pastor and director of music the hours of those ministries are going to be determined in good part by our pledges this year.

I can see where God is leading us as a church. A place where, like in Jerusalem, everyone is welcome at the party. Where we engage our faith and build a place where we feel we belong through fellowship, spirituality and small groups. Where we change lives through the impact we make when we all are involved in acts of service. Where we care for each other through pastoral and faith community nurse care and we touch the future through our education programs. Where we draw closer to our God than we ever thought possible.

I believe we can develop a program where every member is involved in a growth and a service group that meets your needs and which changes lives. I believe we can develop the spiritual groups, family retreats and share the inspirational music that can help each of us go deep with God. I believe we can move the needle for those in need and save the spiritual life of someone suffering.

We feel so strongly about Bradley Hills that my wife and I have decided to increase our pledge to the church by 10% for 2013. I invite you to join us. The people in Jerusalem celebrated so joyfully because they were sharing so generously. And so should we. We need to increase our pledges for our ministries to continue to thrive. But if we do, we too will experience the joy of giving of ourselves to the cause so much larger than ourselves.

Children show wonderment in and about our world. They marvel at the gifts they are given on Christmas morning and on their birthdays. And adults should too. We can learn from children about wonder. There are so many amazing things in our world worth showing wonderment about. That a man can give you a thrill by jumping from space to earth at the speed of sound. That a doctor can give you a new knee. That your spouse, child, or friend can give you unconditional love. That you have been given gifts by your God. And you have been given the free will to decide what to do with them.

Bradley Hills can be a life changing church in and beyond our community and beyond our generation. We can make that happen. But that begins by our celebrating our gifts through giving. Gifts given by God. Earned in the world so we can do something meaningful with them. Needed for the work of the kingdom. Shared with joy by the stewards of God's love. May it be so. Amen.

ⁱ Tony Compolo. *The Kingdom of God is a Party*. Dallas: Word Publishing. 1990. P. 25.

ⁱⁱ David Payne. *Deuteronomy*. The Daily Study Bible Series. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985. P. 92.

ⁱⁱⁱ Compolo, p. 26.

^{iv} Payne, p. 92.

^v Payne, p. 92.