

Stewardship Week 4

Courage and Joy

October 28, 2020

The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

2 Corinthians 9:6-7

One of the Hebrew words translated "courage" means "to show oneself strong." In Latin, the word cor is translated to actually mean "heart". So, to have courage means to apply one's heart to something, traditionally something that could cause an element of fear and uncertainty so that strength shows up on the other side. Biblically courage is the promise of God's presence, power and perseverance with those who have put their faith in God, even during difficult times. Perhaps we can identify with these difficult times right now. These moments are when courage has a chance to show up and bring joy alongside, the moments when God can work the most clearly in our own vulnerability.

Consider, Moses' courage when he confronted the Pharaoh of Egypt and commanded him to let God's people go. Joshua's courage when he conquered Canaan. Young David's courage when he faced and felled the giant Philistine, Goliath. Consider Mary's courage, in fear of being caught, stoned, kicked out and even killed for this child and yet claiming this child as God's. Can you imagine the joy as she watched the baby in the manger? When we act with courage in Christ, scripture shows us joy is undoubtedly going to follow- it's a gift. These Biblical characters were also undoubtedly afraid, and yet in faith they stepped forward and acted. Can you think of a time when you acted in deep and abiding courage? Was there joy on the other side?

The funny thing about courage is that sometimes it sneaks up on us and sometimes we have to choose to be courageous. In its most basic form, imagine the first time you went on a Ferris wheel or roller coaster...it took courage, didn't it, to go that high or that fast or to trust something you cannot control? On the flip side, the joy we get brings smiles and laughter and lightens our hearts so that we can more fully experience God's grace in our midst.

The same courage and joy principle applies to our stewardship practices within the church. Perhaps an antiquated word, tithe, comes from Leviticus 27:30

(among other scriptures) and means to give 10% of whatever little or great things we have in our moneys, time and talents. To tithe literally means to give first fruits, the top of the harvest to God- before we pay anything else. We give in joy to God and then place our faith that God will sustain the rest living into the scripture 'God loves a cheerful giver'. Often what really happens is that we choose to give of what might be leftover or based on how we think the church is "doing" in their ministries and leadership. Like the Israelites hoarding the manna, we forget to place our trust in God. This trust is built on giving God the opportunity to act on our behalf, including in our stewardship.

Interestingly, the statistics around tithing indicate fewer than one-quarter of any congregation's tithes. On average, Christians give around 2.5 percent of their income to churches. So, in that sense most Christians do not tithe. In part because we long to control our environment and realities, in part because we think "no matter how much or little we have, we cannot give and still survive" (a trust issue) and in part because we often don't know how to begin. So this stewardship season, we are encouraging us all to build this God trust into our tithing and pledging practices.

The practice of first fruits tithe brings joy, because it requires courage. When I first began to tithe, I was still growing this muscle. I was on average a 1% giver to the church, money which I did not have at the time. But what the church taught me was to begin with a plan. Each year I gave 1% more than I did the last year, more if our finances were more than expected. That meant every unexpected check that came in the mail from the pharmacy or refund I tithed. Eventually, we reached that 10% and now beyond. God has ALWAYS provided. It took courage and it resulted in joy as I trusted in a narrative of abundance instead of a narrative of scarcity.

Perhaps this connection between courage and joy is a little bit like a toddler running on the playground. Running as hard as they can, they trip on a stick and fall down. When they get back up, they run even harder in joy as if there was never any stick and never any doubt that this courage and joy is what they were meant for. In amazing ways, when we practice tithing, God provides- in finances, in courage and in joy as we practice cheerfully giving. What will you practice and what plan will you have in place for the coming year to give God "firstfruits" of our labor, time and talents?

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