

Wesley United Methodist Church

October 20, 2019

“When You Care Enough to Give the Very Best.”

Genesis 4:1-5

Everyone of us who has ever contributed anything to what we consider to be a worthy and honorable cause has asked the question, “How much shall I give?” Every one of us who has ever put anything in an offering plate has asked the question, “What shall I put in?” or “What shall I give to God and to the church?” When we really think about the questions of what and how much to give to God, we will discover that they are the most fundamental questions of our lives. These questions are not new questions but go back to the very dawn of creation.

The question of what and how much to give to God were the first questions that Adam and Eve, the first man and woman created by God, had to answer. Adam and Eve were placed in the Garden of Eden, which we prefer to as Paradise, a state that was free from worry and work, sin and suffering, debt and death. God told Adam and Eve that they had free access to everything they saw and wanted, with the exception of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The first question that Adam and Eve had to answer was how much obedience they were willing to give to God. They chose not to give total obedience, and dire consequences resulted. They lost Paradise. They lost that ideal easiness that we have been trying to recover ever since.

As the text revealed to us, the question of what and how much should be given to God turned out to be the two major decisions that the two oldest sons of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, had to make. Cain, the elder of the two, became a farmer, while Abel became a sheep herder. In the time these two young men, like their parents before them and everyone of us after them, had to answer the question, “What and how much shall I give to God?” The occasion for these questions was the bringing of an offering of the work of their hands to God. Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel brought the firstlings of his flock and their fat portions.

The Scriptures tell us that the Lord had regard for Abel’s offering but not for Cain’s. The question naturally arises of why Abel’s offering was more favorably received than Cain’s. Let’s think about this. We notice that each of them brought the work of their own hands. Cain didn’t borrow Abel’s sheep, and Abel didn’t try to bring any of Cain’s fruit. As we try to answer the questions of how much and what we should give to God, the first thing we must realize is that we can give only from the works of our own hands. God never required us to give what we don’t have or haven’t produced. Sometimes some of us worry and become discouraged and frustrated because we cannot give what is asked by the church. We must never forget that the God to whom we give does not expect us to give what we do not have. But God does expect us to do the best with the fruit of our own hands. You may not be able to give what others give when you don’t earn their salary. You may not be able to give the same service that someone else gives when you don’t have the same talent, youth, education, or physical ability or vitality. You cannot give sheep when you been raising corn, and you cannot give corn if you have been raising sheep. The Lord doesn’t expect you to do so. But the Lord does expect a decent offering of the fruit that you do have. If Abel’s offering was well received and Cain’s wasn’t, the reason was not that God was more appreciative of sheep than of fruit. That would have been unjust, for it meant that Cain would have had to bring what he didn’t have. There had to have been another reason than the simple fact that Abel brought sheep and Cain brought fruit.

According to the Scriptures, “...Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the first-born of his flock.” The difference between the two offerings was not simply one of substance or quantity but also one of quality. The text says that Abel brought the firstlings of his flock and the fat portions, but they do not say that Cain brought the first fruits and the ripest, but that he simply brought fruit of the ground. The fruit that Cain brought could have been that which was smallest or stunted in growth, or that which was going bad, or that which was left over after he used all that he wanted. Cain gave an offering without sacrifice; he gave a token without any real commitment to God. Cain gave begrudgingly rather than generously; he gave with an attitude rather than gratitude. He gave with his hand but not with his heart.

The difference between Cain and Abel is that Abel “cared enough to give his very best.” Most of you remember this as the slogan of Hallmark, the greeting card company. Several assumptions lie behind their familiar slogan. One is that their brand of card is the best. Another is that people tend to send cards to those whom they care about. Another is that people who truly care for others want to give the best.

No matter what the cause, project or person, we truly give our best when we care. We can give without caring, but we cannot care without giving. Sometimes our giving has little to do with caring. Sometimes we give out of a sense of obligation or duty. We give not because we want to, but we are expected to. We are committed not to the Lord but to our position or office, our job, our responsibility, and our image. And so, we give because giving is the price that we must

pay to fulfill our role. Sometimes we give out of fear. Some people give because they are afraid that if they don't give, God will cut off their blessings. Some people believe that if they don't give, they will begin to have "bad luck" whatever that is. As Christians we don't believe in luck; we believe in God. Giving is not some holy insurance policy that we invest in against trouble. We don't give because we are trying to receive God's blessings of favor. First of all, God's favor is not for sale. Secondly, even if it were for sale, we wouldn't have enough money to buy it. No, we give not because we are trying to buy God but because we love God—and love God enough to give our very best.

Sometimes we give because we expect to receive something in return. We believe that if we take care of God, then God will take care of us. We believe that if we give to God, then God will bless us. Though that is true, our primary reason for giving should not be that giving to God is a good investment that pays sizeable dividends and returns. God and the church are not business investments to sink money into for profit. Some of us give like we're playing the lottery. We put down a minimum fifty-cent or one-dollar offering and expect God to open heaven's windows and bless us to maximum proportions. Our motivation for giving should not be a selfish desire to get back more than what we have given. Whether or not, God blesses us in ways we desire, we should give. We give not because of what we expect in return but because we love God, and because we love God enough to give our very best.

We know what to give—the best. Now we must ask ourselves how much of the best we should give. When the Bible speaks of giving, it refers to tithes and offerings. It does not mention trips, dinners, raffles, contests, sales, or tickets, but tithes and offerings. In the Scriptures God asked people to give a minimum of 10 percent of whatever they received. Tithe means a tenth. Some people give regularly, therefore, consider themselves to be tithers. While regular and consistent giving is good stewardship discipline, it is not necessarily tithing. Tithing means one-tenth, and unless one is giving at least one-tenth, one is not tithing.

In the Scriptures the first 10 percent of a person's income, whatever it was and however it came, was set aside as the Lord's tithe and was considered holy. Leviticus 27:30 states, "A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord; it is holy to the Lord." Since it was believed that the 10 percent was the Lord's anyway, one did not begin to give an offering until one went beyond the 10 percent. In view of the Scriptures, therefore, the tithe was the 10 percent and the minimum that an individual gave to God. The tithe was the Lord's and was set aside and looked upon as holy.

The offering was what one gave beyond the tithe. Some of us think that the tithe is the maximum and that once we have tithed, we have given all. But the tithe is not the maximum; it is the minimum. That's why the Scriptures speak of tithes and offerings. What most of us call an offering is not really an offering since most of us don't give even the basic tithe, of which the offering is an extension.

Tithing requires a level of cheerful giving or commitment that can be attained only through love. Instead of asking, "Can I afford to tithe?" maybe we ought to ask, "Do I love God enough to try to give the very best of myself and my treasures?"

When one gives out of a sense of duty, one says, "I give because I should give." When one gives out of fear, one says, "I give because I had better give." When one gives because one expects something in return, one says, "I give because it is appropriate to give." When one gives because one cares, one says, "I give because I want to give. I give because this God, this church, this cause means something to me. What I regret is not that's time to give or the amount that I am going to give but that I cannot give more. Because I care, I want to give my very best."

Whenever we begin to complain about what or how much God asks of us, we need to remind ourselves that God asks no more than God gives to us. We serve a God who gives us the best.

God gave us not only his best in Jesus, but the best of his best. Can we, dare we, do any less than give back to God the best of our best?