

## “Heaps and Heaps”

Pastor Dave Carlson  
First Presbyterian Church  
Sunday, November 17, 2013

### Old Testament Lesson – 1 Peter 2:1-9

### New Testament Lesson – 2 Chronicles 31:5-12

Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone* once featured a story about a habitual gambler who dies and is taken to a room where there is a gambling table and a dealer. Every time he rolls the dice, he wins. Every hand of cards he holds takes the jackpot. His living arrangements are plush and supplied with everything he could possibly want. “Think of it,” he says, “me making it to heaven.” But then he becomes aware that he is totally alone. He has everything he's ever wanted except the most important thing – the joy of sharing his winnings with others. He's not in paradise after all, he's in hell.

In 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles we read about how the Israelites and Judeans “faithfully ... brought in the contributions, the tithes and the dedicated things.” What inspired them to do so? Was it in the joy of sharing those blessings with others? Maybe it was the blessings they expected to get in return. Or maybe they had another reason to give so generously to God through the temple of the LORD?

Scripture tells us (quote), “As soon as the word spread, the people of Israel gave in abundance the first fruits of grain, wine, oil, honey, and of all the produce of the field; and they brought in abundantly the tithe of everything.” “As soon as word spread....” About what? What was going on in these ancient times that was so amazing and so inspiring?

What we heard read this morning is a chronicle of the reign of King Hezekiah, of the line of David. Hezekiah is famous for restoring worship and devotion to God in the temple of the Lord, after the people had slipped a bit in their religious practices.

The word that had spread – the word that drew all the people back to God – was, as recorded a bit earlier in Chronicles the king's desire that everyone gather in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, to return to the religious practices that God had established for them and that they had neglected if not outright abandoned.

It wasn't the joy of sharing their blessings with others – though they certainly received that now and had been missing out on it before. It wasn't the blessings they expected to get in return – though through their giving, God did bless them abundantly.

No, what it was that inspired the people to give so generously was their receiving the word of God, and then fulfilling God's desires for them. Elsewhere in scripture in the Book of Numbers, chapter 9 it says, “The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the first month of the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying to them: ‘Have the Israelites keep the Passover at its appointed time.’”

The people merely returned to keeping the Passover as instructed by God. That's what began this renewed era of God's blessings.

Today, we struggle to maintain our religious practices just like the Israelites struggled to maintain theirs. And in reality, they are the same practices – different in actuality, but the same in spirit. The ancient practices of God's people are the same practices that we are called to follow today, except our faith-based practices have been reinterpreted and reinvigorated through Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection.

The ancient Israelites were called to restore the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, and we are called to restore the temple of the Lord in our hearts. The ancient Israelites were called to return a tithe to God, and we are called to give a percentage of our income in service to God. The Israelites stored up their treasures in huge chambers, and we are called to store up our treasures in heaven.

So you see, we're not that different from the ancient Israelites. Just like the Israelites struggled to understand and follow the word of God, we also struggle with how to respond to God's word for us today. There's the struggle of owing a debt to God for all our many blessings. There's the struggle of having enough for our needs. And there's the struggle of having more than we need and knowing what to do with it.

At a Wednesday evening church meeting, a very wealthy man rose to give his testimony. "I'm a millionaire," he said, "and I attribute it all to the rich blessings of God in my life. I can still remember the turning point in my faith, like it was yesterday: "I had just earned my first dollar and I went to a church meeting that night. The speaker was a missionary who told about his work. I knew that I only had a dollar bill and had to either give it all to God's work or give nothing." "So at that moment I decided to give my whole dollar to God. I believe that God blessed that decision, and that is why I am a rich man today." As he finished, it was clear that everyone had been moved by this man's story. And as he took his seat, a woman sitting in the same pew leaned over and said: "Wonderful story! I dare you to do it again!"

There, that's the struggle of having **more than we need** and not knowing what to do with it. And God helps us with that struggle. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles, we are given the example of the people of Israel and Judah, who "brought in the tithe of cattle and sheep, and the tithe of the dedicated things that had been consecrated to the Lord their God, and laid them in heaps. In the third month they began to pile up the heaps, and finished them in the seventh month."

Not only did God's people have **heaps and heaps**, they had heaps piled on top of other heaps – heaps upon heaps. How did they become so blessed? The answer is: God's people are blessed when they are good stewards of God's many blessings.

Notice what Hezekiah does when he sees the heaps upon heaps. "Hezekiah and the officials came and saw the heaps," says 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles, and "they blessed the Lord and his people Israel." And "then Hezekiah questioned the

priests and the Levites about the heaps.” Hezekiah is concerned that maybe there are heaps upon heaps because God’s people are not being good stewards of all that God has given them. Maybe they’re hoarding what they have at the expense of others going without.

That’s the struggle of **having enough**, enough for our needs. When we struggle with having enough we think we need to stash away what we have today for fear of not having enough tomorrow. And God’s got an answer for that one, too. We see that when the chief priest is asked by Hezekiah about the heaps upon heaps. When asked, says 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles, “the chief priest, Azariah, who was of the house of Zadok, answered (saying), ‘Since they began to bring the contributions into the house of the Lord, we have had enough to eat and have plenty to spare; for the Lord has blessed his people, so that we have this great supply left over.’”

The answer to the struggle of having enough is to know that God will provide. And God does provide as long as we continue to develop and maintain our faith-based religious practices and come together in worship and devotion to God.

“As soon as word spread” about the restoration of the temple of the Lord and the return of God’s people to their the religious practices, the Israelites received blessing after blessing until they had heaps upon heaps, enough for any who had need.

This brings us to the final struggle we’re looking at today when it comes to understanding and following God’s word – the struggle of owing a debt to God for all our many blessings.

The ancient Israelites had to maintain sacrificial practices for them to stay right with God. But for us, that’s just not so. For us, a new day has dawned. God showers us with grace and mercy through Jesus Christ, and that covers not only anything we’ve done in the past, but also anything against God we could possibly do in the future.

Because of God’s grace and mercy, we are **able to give freely**. And that’s where the real struggle comes in. We can’t earn God’s blessing by doing good, but we are asked to do good anyway, on our own free will. We can’t be anymore forgiven by living life more faithfully, but we are asked to be more faithful anyway, freed from that which would hold us back or distract us from our faith-based practices such as giving in service to the Lord.

And yet we can’t be anymore assured of God’s love and protection and provision by giving more to God’s service, and still, we are called to freely give all that we can and then some, which is to say, we give sacrificially. Not to cover a debit; but to **honor God’s loving sacrifice**, Christ’s sacrifice, freely given for us and for our salvation.

Next Sunday as we again gather in worship and devotion to God, we will again pledge ourselves in service to God, pledge our time and our talents and our treasures. We will do this not because of anything we expect to get out of it in the future, for God’s blessings can not be earned. We will do this not because of anything we feel bad about in our past, for God’s mercy cannot be purchased.

We will pledge our time talents and treasures not because we have extra to give, for all that we have belongs to God. It's not for God's benefit nor is it for our benefit that we give. No, the reason we give sacrificially through the church, through service opportunities here and elsewhere, through our faith practices maintained both here in public and in private – the reason we do anything that is pleasing to God is because of God's word made flesh.

God sent Jesus Christ into a world that could never be worthy of such a gift. And we, having received that gift – having received Jesus in our hearts and in our lives – we don't need to hang on any fears or struggles we may have in giving of ourselves.

In our knowledge and faith in Jesus Christ, we need only do one thing – to give freely – free of fear and concern and worry and struggle – just as in Christ, God so freely gives to us. Amen.

### **Pastoral Prayer**

Gracious Creator, you have made us for yourself, and before we draw our first breath, you know us and have called us by name.

What a glorious and freeing thought, and for some of us, perhaps a little frightening as well.

We are afraid of being vulnerable, yet your intimate knowledge of us becomes an invitation to come as we are, without pretense or posturing, without defensiveness, without cover-up.

In your warm embrace we are safe and cherished. We can rest trusting that your grace, rather than our striving, will secure this day and our future.

When we seek you, Lord, we find that already we are found. When we feel lost and don't know which way to turn, if we listen carefully you call to us and guide us.

Help us to acknowledge your presence and protection, even as we give voice to your prayer, the Lord's Prayer, saying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.