

## The Giving of God's People Exodus 36: 1-7

The passage of scripture we have just read takes place two years into the forty-year wilderness wanderings of the children on Israel. God's servant Moses had led them out of slavery in Egypt. For over 400 years, the Pharaoh's of Egypt had held the Hebrew people in captivity. But now they were free. Now they were liberated. They had not yet found a homeland. They were nomads moving from place to place. But they were free; free to worship the God of their deliverance.

And their God had delivered them and graciously supplied every need. When they were hungry, God sent them manna to eat in the morning and quail to eat at night. When they were thirsty, God made water spring from the rocks of the desert. The Lord who delivered them also provided for them. And even though they had not yet settled into a land they could call their own, they would worship the God who liberated them and sustained them.

But where would they worship their God? From humanities beginnings there is something at the core of our being that needs a place – a sacred place set aside for the worship of God. It is not as though God needs that holy place, for God himself is holy and will dwell wheresoever He will. But it seems we need holy places. We need sacred spaces.

And that is why 13 out of 40 chapters of Exodus are devoted to the planning and construction of ancient Israel's first worship space call the Tabernacle. It was the most important shrine of Israel prior to the construction of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. The Tabernacle was meant to be portable because, remember, at this time Israel was still nomadic. Yet, even though it was moveable, it was to be beautiful and well crafted to reflect the glory of God. In these 13 chapters in the central section of Exodus that detail the planning and construction of this sacred space, we are told not only how it is to be built, but where the resources will come from to build it. The resources will come from the giving of God's people.

In chapter 35 of Exodus we hear Moses' words:

*<sup>4</sup>Moses said to all the congregation of the Israelites: This is the thing that the LORD has commanded: <sup>5</sup>Take from among you an offering to the LORD; let whoever is of a generous heart bring the Lord's offering: gold, silver, and bronze; <sup>6</sup>blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and fine linen; goats' hair, <sup>7</sup>tanned rams' skins, and fine leather; acacia wood, <sup>8</sup>oil for the light, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, <sup>9</sup>and onyx stones and gems to be set in the ephod and the breast piece. <sup>10</sup>All who are skillful among you shall come and make all that the LORD has commanded: the tabernacle.*

The tabernacle will be built and it will be built because of the giving of God's people. And that is where we pick up today in the 36<sup>th</sup> chapter of Exodus. These verses we have read today tell us something about the character of the giving that God's people had in ancient times. And on this Lord's Day prior to our own Consecration Sunday here at FPC, perhaps the Lord who delivered and sustained Israel might have something to say to us about giving through their example from long ago.

I want to suggest to you three things about the giving of God's people that is evident in this Old Testament story. First of all...

### **...It Came From the Heart (v.2)**

In our passage today, Moses called for skilled craftsman - two of whom were Bezalel and Oholiab - to come and begin work on the tabernacle. And in calling these craftsman he asks for those:

*"...whose heart was stirred to come to do the work." (v.2)*

Here we are at the very foundation of spiritual giving – giving from a glad and generous heart. The people of Israel gave because their hearts were inspired to do so out of sheer gratitude for all that God had done for them in their lives. God had delivered them from Pharaoh's might army. He protected and guided them with a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. He parted the Red Sea for them and brought its mighty waters crashing down upon Pharaoh's chariots. He fed them and clothed them in the wilderness. And so in glad response to God's grace, they gave from the heart.

Another way to say this is they gave out of love – not out of obligation; not out of guilt; not out of indebtedness – but out of sheer love for God. That's what giving from the heart is – it is giving that has its origin in love.

There is a beautiful poem by James Dillet Freeman that says:

*For the more we give to love,  
the more we have to give.  
And when we have given all we have,  
and there is nothing left but love,  
what then is left to be taken from me?  
If you ask yourself, "How well do I live?"  
the answer comes, "How much do you love?"*

*(James Dillet Freeman, "How Well Do I Live? How Much Do You Love?" in Love, Loved, Loving! The Principle Parts of Life (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1974), 91.)*

This poem reminds me that all of my giving to the Lord must come from the heart. It must be an expression of love and gratitude to God or it amounts to little. The measure of how well I live is how much I give out of sheer love. The ancient people of Israel gave to build the tabernacle because their "hearts were stirred within them." Can we do any less?

Between now and next Sunday when we will make our commitments in giving to God's tabernacle in our midst, I'd like to invite each of us to search our own hearts and ask ourselves: How much are we in love with God? How glad and generous are our hearts?

I once heard a minister pray this prayer at the dedication of the offering on a Sunday morning:

*“Lord, regardless of what we say with our lips, this is offering is really what we say about you; this is really what we feel about you; this is really what you mean to us. Amen.”*

I was taken aback. But the more I reflected on it, I think he was praying a hard truth: our giving bespeaks our hearts.

Also evident in the giving of God’s people in this Old Testament story is that it...

### **...Was Uncompelled (v. 3)**

You probably noticed how the offerings of the children of Israel were described in verse 3. They were “free-will offerings.” In the building of the sacred space for the worship of Yahweh, people were asked to give voluntarily. And if you stop and think about that, it bespeaks a powerful message about the Lord whom the Hebrews worshipped.

This was a God far different than the deities the Hebrews lived under in Egypt. The Pharaoh of Egypt was considered a god. And in their lives under that “god” everything was conscripted from them. It was taken from them by brute force. It was coerced from them, even beaten out of them through slave labor.

But the Lord would not treat them that way. Yahweh was kind and gracious and simply invited them to give freely and voluntarily out of glad and generous hearts. Their giving was uncompelled. And so must ours be to the Lord’s church today.

No one is required to give to the Lord through First Presbyterian Church. We do not have membership dues and we do not send anyone a bill for services rendered. No one is compelled here. This is a place of grace and we entrust that the God of grace will speak to human hearts to support God’s work he wants done here. That is why this year on Consecration Sunday we are asking each of us to simply respond in our own hearts to one question:

*“What percentage of my income do I believe God is asking me to give to his work through First Presbyterian Church?”*

And I believe if we will faithfully ask and faithfully respond that question, God will provide.

When we look back at the ancient people of God as they first sought to provide a place of beauty and grandeur where God could be worshipped, we can see that the giving of God’s people was a giving that came from the heart. It was a giving that was uncompelled. And finally, I’m sure you probably noticed that it was a giving that was...

### **...More Than Enough. (v. 5)**

You have to love this part of the story. Bezalel and Oholiab and all the other craftsman were hard at work on the tabernacle. And everyday the offerings from the people – heartfelt

and freely given – kept pouring in. It got to the point where there was so much being brought that the workers put down their tools and left the construction site. They made their way to Moses and said:

*“Hey Moseh, you need to tell these people to hold up on the giving! We have way more than enough to complete this job. In fact, there is so much being given it’s getting in the way of progress!”*

Wow! Wouldn’t that be a great problem to have? I would love to be able to stand in this pulpit and say to you – “Whoa! Y’all stop giving now! We have way too much! We’re gonna pass the plates back down the aisle and y’all take some out!” But that is not the case yet at FPC. We do not yet have more than enough.

I came across this story about a fellow I have quoted before, Tony Campola. Dr Campola is a professor of religion at Eastern College in Philadelphia and an ordained Baptist minister, who has a unique and powerful witness for social justice. Dr. Campola was once speaking at a women’s conference that had over 300 in attendance. At he sat on the dais waiting to speak, the president of the organization read a letter from a missionary. It was a moving letter expressing a need for \$4000 to take care of an emergency in the community where he was stationed. After reading the letter, the president of the women’s organization said, “We need to pray that God will provide the resources to meet the need of this missionary.” She then turned to Tony and said, “Dr. Campola will you please pray for us.”

Now Tony Campola is not a shy and retiring type. His reply to the president’s request was “No.” Startled, the woman said, “I beg your pardon.” He said, “No, I won’t pray for that.” He said:

“I believe God has already provided the resources and that all we need to do is give. Tell you what I’m going to do. I’m going to step up to this table and give every bit of cash I have in my pocket. And if all of you will do the same, I think God has already provided the resources.”

The president chuckled a bit and said, “Well, I guess we get the point. He is trying to teach is that all we need to do is give sacrificially” And Tony said, "No, that is not what I am trying to teach you. I’m trying to teach you that God has already provided for this missionary. All we need to do is give it. Here, I’m going to put down all of my money I have with me."

So he opened his wallet put down \$15 he had in it. He then looked at the president of the organization. Reluctantly, she opened her purse and took out all of her money, which was about \$40, and put it on the table. One by one the rest of the women filed by and put their money on the table, too. When the money was counted they had collected more than \$4,000."

Tony Campolo said, "Now, here’s the lesson. God always supplies for our needs, and he supplied for this missionary, too. The only problem was we were keeping it for ourselves. Now let’s pray and thank God for His provision." *(As told in a sermon by Mark Hensley, “Can we give to much?” West Greeley Baptist Church Greeley CO, February 3, 2002).*

Next Sunday we will celebrate Consecration Sunday in the life of our church and each and every one of us will have the opportunity to estimate what we will give to the Lord's work through FPC in 2011. Each and every one of us will contemplate the question "what percentage of my income is the Lord asking me to give?"

And you know, when I look at this step chart in the bulletin today and where so many of us are in our giving, (45% of our members give less than \$5 a week to the church!) I know that I do not have to pray that God will provide for the resources needed to keep this congregation's mission and ministry strong and vital. God has already provided more than enough. It is in our wallets. All we have to do is open them and give.

At our celebration luncheon next week, I am looking forward to standing before you and praying a prayer of thanksgiving for God's provision for more, much more, than enough.

**L. Ted Smith**  
**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Cartersville, GA**  
**November 7, 2010**