

1 Sermon, October 17, 2010

Texts: Genesis 28:10-22, Philippians 4:10-20

Title: Recycling God's Goodness

Central Idea: giving is recycling your income

1. Recycling -- good in lots of ways
2. Giving -- good in many of the same ways
3. Jacob story
4. Rules for recycling, guidelines for giving

1. Recycling -- good in lots of ways

About 20 years ago, when we lived in Oshkosh, I used to go to some length to recycle. I would string plastic milk jugs by the handle on a length of twine. I de-labeled and crushed steel cans, and put them in a paper bag. I had a different bag for glass. I saved all our office paper that didn't have a shiny coating. Then I'd load up the trunk of our car with all that stuff, and bring it to the local fire station, where there were recycling bins.

It felt good to do, because I knew I was doing the right thing.

It was the right thing for lots of reasons.

First, recycling is something that helps remind us of our priorities. It is a little thing that reminds us of the value of the environment.

Second, Recycling puts people to work in the sorting process—more than would be put to work in cutting down trees for the same amount of paper pulp.

Recycling saves money for local municipalities, because they have to pay to get rid of garbage, where there is a market for recyclables.

Recycling saves land that would otherwise be used up for landfills.

Recycling puts a resource in its proper perspective. A number 2 plastic jug may not seem to be much, but it is a resource.

Yes, it took a while to find the right place to bring it, to learn how to sort it, and so on. I learned from a flyer that cereal boxes and kleenex boxes aren't recyclable. The fiber in them has been recycled so many times that it is really poor quality, and can't be made into new paper.

I also learned that there is a non-profit corporation that collects any kind of discarded fabric and either makes rags or shreds the fabric to fibers to make new cloth.

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Now, here in Columbus, recycling has gotten really easy. You put it all in one container, and somebody else sorts it. That shows that recyclables are a resource important enough to pay someone to sort it.

2. Giving -- good in many of the same ways

About that same time, 20 years ago, Marianne and I began to very intentionally recycle a portion of our income. We had been challenged, and decided that it was important to give intentionally to the church.

God had given us so many blessings that we wanted to return the blessing to God in a symbolic way through our giving to the church.

Surprisingly, the recycling of our income had some of the same sorts of benefits as recycling our metal, plastic and paper!

First of all, this way of recycling our income felt good. It felt good to be doing the right thing. Recycling our income helps us to remember our priorities—that we want to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, mind.

Recycling our income also puts a resource in perspective. Unlike a number 2 plastic jug, which we undervalue, we tend to overvalue money. When we recycle our income by giving, it reminds us that it's really not our money any more than it is our environment. It is God's money, and it's meant to be recycled in a way that helps others spiritually and physically.

Lastly, recycling our income was like recycling our bottles and cans because it takes discipline and planning. It takes a while to be comfortable with it.

Just like there is a learning curve to know what numbers of plastics are recyclable, there is a learning curve to giving. We have to test out our giving level and find that it is something that becomes normal and natural, just like recycling becomes normal and natural.

It seems odd that thankfulness is a learned behavior. But it is true. Just like with many things, thankfulness is something we learn by doing. The giving itself helps us to be grateful, because as we give, we count our blessings and remember that we can give because we have been given so much.

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3. Jacob story

For an example, I want to look at the Old Testament story of Jacob.

You may remember that Jacob was kind of a sneaky guy. As a young man, he stole his father's blessing. He often was able to make things go his way. But in today's story, Jacob's father sent him off to a distant land. Jacob was told not to marry one of the local women, who were of a different religion and ethnicity, but to go to the land of his mother's birth to find a wife.

So Jacob went. He was young, probably alone and afraid, going to a foreign place to find relatives. After traveling that first day, he found a spot to lie down, and went to sleep and had a dream of angels going up and down a ladder. And then God appeared in his dream, and told him that he was the God of his father and grandfather, and that he would protect Jacob. God promised that Jacob would have many descendants, and they would one day own the land Jacob now lay upon. And God ended the promise by saying "I will bring you back to this land, and I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised."

Well, Jacob woke up from his dream. And realizing that this particular place was holy, he marked it with a small pillar of stones.

Then Jacob made a promise:

"*If* God will be with me, and *if* God will keep me in this way that I go, and *if* God will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and *if* I come again to my father's house in peace, *then* the LORD shall be my God, and this stone, which I've set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one tenth to you."

Jacob gave a *conditional* commitment. If God did these things for him, Jacob would worship God and give one tenth of his income to God.

We shouldn't be too hard on Jacob. After all, it was probably the first time God spoke to him in a dream. And Jacob was probably feeling pretty unsure about a lot of things out there in unfamiliar territory. And Jacob did make this promise of his own free will, without any prompting.

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But if Jacob could make this conditional promise without yet having seen God's blessings — surely we can make a promise when we have seen God's blessings in our lives.

Jacob knew in his heart of hearts that he ought to give. He just wanted proof that it would be worth it. That's a very human tendency, to want proof about the future.

But really, we give not because we have proof, but because we have trust. We trust the organizations we give to, even though we know they're human organizations, and not perfect. We trust that somehow God will use these imperfect organizations (like the church) to further God's kingdom, so we give.

We give because we trust.

4. Rules for recycling, guidelines for giving

Which brings us back to recycling.

We recycle, in part, because we trust that our recyclables really are separated from the garbage, and not just landfilled. We trust that it is true that recycling helps the environment.

And we recycle our income — we give — because we trust. We trust in God to lead us, but we want to do our part. We know God has blessed us, we trust that God will continue to bless us, and we want to hold up our end of the bargain.

When our boys were little, we sometimes went to a swimming pool, and I would wade out away from the side of the pool. I would encourage the boys to push off toward me, and trust. I wanted them to trust that the water would hold them up, or at least that I would catch them.

Giving is something like that. We do it because we trust God, but also because we're *trying to trust God more*. We need to let go of our money a little bit, because it represents security just as surely as the side of the pool. We let go a little bit, and discover that God will keep us afloat.

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If you're new to this, you might want to know that studies have shown that the average United Methodist household gives about two percent of its income. If you're just beginning to plan your giving, I would suggest that as a good level. Two percent is a level that helps you to let go a little bit, while still being cautious and prudent about other expenses.

You can give at the two percent level and still keep one hand on the side of the pool.

But the Biblical standard is still a tithe -- ten percent of your income. It is a standard used by the ancient Hebrews, who gave one tenth of their harvest to the maintenance of the temple.

Tithing was the giving of the "first fruits" of the harvest. Before collecting any for yourself, you would give the first tenth to the temple. It was a simple system of symbolically offering up the best to God.

I've known several people in my ministry for whom tithing was a great joy. It was something they did that made them feel they were doing the right thing, in harmony with the other good actions they did in the world. They enjoyed tithing in the same way that people enjoy giving to a small child and seeing their face light up. To them, it was simply a joy to give.

Our family has tithed for years now. We had to work up to it, but we've never regretted it. It's been sort of spiritual discipline, to keep our own natural greed in check, and learn to trust in God more. It was our first fruits -- our first priority -- so it never came in conflict with other expenses. Once we began to tithe, we've never regretted it.

Today's other reading, from Paul's letter to the church at Philippi, puts things further into perspective.

Paul was out there on the edge, ministering without any assurance of income. He was hoping people would support his work, but there was no guarantee.

So Paul wrote to the church at Philippi that he knew they were concerned for him, but had no opportunity to show it. But when the chance came along to send him some money, they responded generously.

Paul thanked them.

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We are like the church at Philippi, seeing needs in the world, and wanting to respond. But sometimes the needs seem so overwhelming. What can we do that will make a difference?

With the area in Pakistan bigger than the state of Wisconsin, what can we do that will make a difference?

With the state of politics in our country so dominated by money interests, what can we do that will make a difference?

With hungry and hurting people in our community, and no real way to sort out the ones who are working really hard from the ones who are expecting a handout, what can we do that will make a difference?

With people all around us whose spiritual lives are no deeper than what you can get watching Oprah, what can we do that will make a difference?

We, too, search for the opportunity to trust, to make a difference, to give in a way that will really recycle God's goodness. Tithing is part of the answer; but God is calling us to use our time and our talents, too.

So I wish for you all the blessings of recycling a portion of your income. I hope that you experience the good feeling of doing the right thing; the challenge of trying to trust God more; the reaffirmation of your own priorities; the knowledge that you are being stretched by God into ways that are more faithful and joyful.

Thanks be to God, who leads us, challenges us and supports us.
Amen.

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the LORD stood beside him and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place--and I did not know it!" And he was afraid, and said,

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"How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one tenth to you." (Genesis 28:10-22, NRSV).

"I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress. You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen." Philippians 4:10-20, NRSV.