

# Generous, Willing Hearts

Exodus 35 & 1 Peter 4:10-17

*29<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time/21<sup>st</sup> October 2007 Stewardship Emphasis II*

With generous, willing hearts, not under compulsion, but freely, the ones whose hearts were stirred and spirits willing made an offering to Yahweh for the construction of the tabernacle, the tent of meeting for Yahweh. With generous, willing hearts they went forward with their gifts of gratitude for the grace bestowed upon them. The command to build the tabernacle was given in Exodus 25. But Moses went off to the mountains for a while; the people grew impatient, became anxious and started taking matters into their own hands. Yahweh was not to be found, so they invested their treasures in a golden calf, and – well, you know the rest. Yahweh and Moses were not happy.

Here in chapter 35 we're on the other side of sin, and we find a new command to build a place for Yahweh. With the gratitude that comes with grace, the people responded. Verse 29 tells us "all the Israelite men and women whose hearts made them willing to bring anything for the work that Yahweh commanded by Moses to be done, brought it as a freewill offering to Yahweh." The reference to women here is unusual, as if to say, *even* the women with their rings and gems were eager to come forward, to *outdo* what was offered before to the false god of the golden calf.<sup>1</sup> That's how eager they were to respond with gratitude to the grace given.

This is an extremely dramatic text that culminates in chapter 40 when Yahweh's *glory* fills the tent of meeting, this *glory* that signifies the actual presence of God. Yahweh desires a gathering place for the Israelites, not because God requires a house of worship, but because the *people* need a house of worship. It's also more than a gathering place; it's a *dwelling place* for the glory of God, a constant reminder by day and by night that Yahweh is not an absent God, but one who is continually present, present to us. The construction of the tabernacle helps us to *see* (!) the presence of God.

This means the dwelling place of God has to be worthy of Yahweh. So with generous, willing hearts the people gave of themselves to construct *a witness to the presence of Yahweh*. Did you notice the way this text appeals to the senses, especially to visual sensibility? It's important to *see*, to *witness* this sign. Also, "The tabernacle

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2004), 516n.

evokes a sense of dramatic participation, so that the active verbs of making and doing, bringing and offering require Israelites to be actively, physically engaged in the practice of presence.” As Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann suggests, “the visual power of the sanctuary is to be all-containing and all-consuming,” the active verbs here means the participants can’t be “passive observers.”<sup>2</sup> It requires everything they had to give. The construction required exotic materials and intense artistic skill, the skill given to the people. It was common in Canaanite and Greek myths to appeal to a craftsman god as the one who did the building for the gods. Here Yahweh inspires a human being with the skill, or “wisdom” of the craft, as well as with the ability to administer the project. God entrusts his people with the skill and the means to carry out the construction.<sup>3</sup> To create a context for the presence of God.

What does such a place look like? It’s difficult to say, but there’s no doubt that Exodus 35-40 is “preoccupied with beauty.”<sup>4</sup> Gold, silver, bronze, crimson yarns, fine linen, fine leather, acacia wood, onyx stones and gems. God filled the workers with a “divine spirit,” with skill, intelligence, and every kind of craft, to devise artistic designs, working in gold, silver, and bronze. Every kind of artisan and craftsman, even a skilled embroiderer was required. You see, this is what the presence of God does in the world, *it evokes beauty, it has an aesthetic appeal, it delights our senses, and it dazzles our eyes.* You see, “the tabernacle is made into a suitable and appropriate place for Yahweh’s visible presence by the practice of beauty commensurate with Yahweh’s character.” This text is making the audacious claim that “it is possible to host the holiness of Yahweh” and that there might be “communion with Yahweh, a genuine, real, and palpable presence. Such hosting,” Brueggemann suggests, “is done only with *great care, costly investment, and scrupulous attention to detail.*”<sup>5</sup> There is no other way.

Today, there are no single tabernacles to Yahweh. Two glorious temples that once stood in Jerusalem were destroyed, first by the Babylonians in 586 BC and by the Romans in 70. For Christians, the locus of God has moved from a specific place to Jesus who, according to the Gospels “dwelt” or literally “tabernacled” with us, took up residence, abiding with grace and truth.<sup>6</sup> The presence of God dwelled in him fully, palpably, beautifully. However, it seems to me that this question of presence, the

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 668

<sup>3</sup> Alter, 517n.

<sup>4</sup> Brueggemann, 426

<sup>5</sup> Brueggemann, 426

<sup>6</sup> These uses are in connection with Jesus’ Transfiguration (Mt 17:4; Mk 9:5; Lk 9:33) and the Prologue to John (Jn 1:14). See also Revelation 7:15 and 21:3.

presence of God, the presence of Jesus continues to haunt human existence and shape the life and work of the church.

I'm struck how the construction of the tabernacle and the work of the church share a common purpose. *With generous, willing hearts, great care, costly investment, and scrupulous attention to detail, using every skill and craft available to us, making use of our divinely-given intelligence, this is what we're asked to do: to witness to the world the presence of God.* Isn't this what Jesus did and calls us to do? Isn't this what calls us here? Isn't this our hope? Isn't this our hope for others? That somehow, somehow through the ministry, the overall mission of the church, in us, even despite us, all might see the palpable, beautiful presence of God? With gratitude for God's generous grace we become good stewards of all that is available to us so that others will know what we know, feel what we feel, see what we see, and hope for what we believe.

Through the gifts of generous, willing hearts the ministry of Catonsville Presbyterian Church is a witness to God's graceful presence in the world. Through our gifts, our offerings, our tithes we support this crucial ministry of witness.

In reading of the tabernacle construction, I immediately thought of our capital campaign and the work that will soon commence on this building, where the renovations will enhance the beauty of this tabernacle and through it, witness to God's presence. There's been scrupulous attention to detail, great care, and costly investment in this project. Caring for and improving this building – and the money required to do so is considerable – are all part of our witness. The way the community sees this building, the way we present ourselves on Frederick Road and to ourselves, says something about our witness to Christ's presence in our lives.

Last week in the children's message, Laurie White had a conversation with her daughter, Eva, about stewardship. Laurie asked, "How do you take care of a church?" Eva said, "You can sweep floors and help clean up. Rake leaves. Stuff like that." "But is the church just a building," Laurie rejoined. "No," Eva said, "it's a place where we worship God. Taking care of the building is important. A lot of people come here to be together like Jesus wanted us to do." "So you're saying the church is a building and a people being together?" Laurie asked, "So how do you take care of the people?" Eva said, "Feed them, care about them, and love them." This is how we witness the presence of God in the world.

When you look over the annual report for this church, study the budget (which I wish more would do), or carefully read the life in community insert in the bulletin, you can see all the ways we're witnesses to God's presence. But there's so much more we're

called to do and can do, strengthening a ministry worthy of Yahweh. At a recent Session meeting I asked the elders to name the strengths, opportunities, weaknesses, and threats to this ministry. Some responses. Strengths: appreciation for the staff, our music ministry, our commitment to service (be sure to read Michelle Stafford's piece in the November *Messenger*, and you'll see the kind of witness this ministry is having in the world) and mission (the pediatric ward in Lubondai, Congo, will probably be completed this fall, ahead of schedule), teaching and preaching ministry, passion, commitment to social justice, youth ministry, the child care center, our location.

But there are opportunities before us, new ways we can witness the presence of God. When we are stewards of our resources we can reach out even more to the community. We're committed to this. (\$5000 from the LaVeck Bequest has been set aside for evangelism and outreach). Other opportunities, reaching out to new families as the neighborhoods of Catonsville undergo considerable change, increasing and celebrating ethnic diversity, greater hands-on mission work, reaching out to young adults, and students at UMBC.

Regarding weaknesses, they include: we're too introverted, don't promote ourselves enough, there are not enough of us, trying to be all things to all people, not enough money. As for threats: competing interests, overcommitted schedules, weekend sports, denominational strife, polarization in society influencing the congregation, suspicion of organized religion in the culture, and lack of resources. On both the weakness and threat list we have: *money*.

I came across this child's prayer recently: "Dear God, If you give me genie lamp like Aladdin I will give you anything you want except money or my chess set. Raphael."

Jesus said, where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. Dollars follow vision. Where are our hearts?<sup>7</sup> There's always money for the things we want or think we need. With generous, willing hearts for who God is toward us in Christ, the gifts, the offerings always flow. We who are *on the other side of sin* know God's grace and blessings; we know God's presence in our lives. Our gifts, our pledges to God's work in this church allow us to be better witnesses.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. quotation from the worship bulletin, "It is only with the heart that one can see clearly, for what is essential is hidden from the eyes." Antoine de Saint Exupéry (1900-1944), *The Little Prince* [1943].

I firmly believe, as I've said many times over the years, that the gifts and resources needed for this church to thrive are all contained within the members and friends of the congregation. But I also believe that we're at a critical time in the life of this church; we're on the cusp of something new that God is doing through us – God's glory is seeking to fill this place in a new way. This requires discernment, prayer, focus, and ever greater commitment – *not* to the church, *but to Christ!*

Next week is Commitment Sunday, Reformation Sunday. As I said last week, maybe you've already sent in your pledge card or know what your commitment will be for next year. Maybe you haven't given much thought to it. Maybe you'll keep it the same, maybe bump it up a little. But I would like to encourage you wait before making a decision or if you already made a decision, to reconsider. Take this time to take stock of the manifold expressions of God's grace in your life.

*How has God been generous to you and your family, and what kind of response is the Spirit leading you to make?*

*Or bringing it a little closer to home, how has God been present to you through the ministry of this church?*

*Where or in whom have you witnessed the grace and healing presence of Christ in and through this community?*

*Where do you see God at work through us?*

*With generous, willing hearts, with hearts stirred and spirits willing, what will be our offering?*

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