

Our Reason for Hope is Real      2021  
1 Chronicles 29:10-17 Mark 12:38-44

1 Chronicles 29:10-17 (New Revised Standard Version)

Then David blessed the Lord in the presence of all the assembly; David said: “Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of our ancestor Israel, forever and ever. Yours, O Lord, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. Riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might; and it is in your hand to make great and to give strength to all. And now, our God, we give thanks to you and praise your glorious name. “But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to make this freewill offering? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you. For we are aliens and transients before you, as were all our ancestors; our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no hope. O Lord our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a house for your holy name comes from your hand and is all your own. I know, my God, that you search the heart, and take pleasure in uprightness; in the uprightness of my heart I have freely offered all these things, and now I have seen your people, who are present here, offering freely and joyously to you.

Mark 12:38-44 (New Revised Standard Version)

As he taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.” He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

And now, our God, we give thanks to you and praise your glorious name. (1 Chr 29:13)

Sometimes when I get home from work, our little dog Chloe  
will be resting by my wife’s legs on her recliner.

Then when I walk over to greet and kiss Kathy,  
our energetic dog starts jumping up and down with wild excitement,  
wagging her tail so hard she can barely stand, & life is all good.

**It is absolute, unrestrained, all-out exuberant happy-dog joy**  
as she fulfills her place and purpose in God’s desire for Creation.

In our own Christian experience of God’s amazing graciousness,  
there are blessed and wonderful **Jesus-moments** of such grateful joy,  
times when our relationship and walk with God is right in-synch...

... moments of life well-aware of God’s gracious presence and promise,  
confident and amazed at how faithfully God freely provides  
in loving abundance for our needs, for our good, growth & joy.

I believe that David, the King of Israel was having such a moment  
of all-out grateful happy-dog joy when he ponders, vs. 14

"But who am I, and what is my people, that we should **be able** to make this freewill offering? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you.

This text comes from a time late in David's life.

He had risen from an insignificant young shepherd boy  
to having become the nation of Israel's greatest king.  
And from a few scattered tribes hiding from Philistines in the hills,  
they've become a great nation that now dominates the region,  
as they were now enjoying **the best and golden age of Israel.**

David had wanted to build a temple that would honor the Lord God,  
but the Lord insisted that David's son Solomon would build it.  
So David and the people of Israel had given generously and freely  
a huge amount of wealth and building materials toward the project.

They felt incredibly privileged and richly blessed by God  
that they had been able to give and contribute so much...  
... and they recognized that it was the Lord

who was the true source of all their wealth and prosperity,  
which is the truth and heart of faithful stewardship, vs. 16  
**O LORD our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a house for your holy name comes from your hand and is all your own.**

We too are able to give only because God first freely gave to us  
entrusted to us for a brief time according to God's purpose.  
**And that is the heart of godly and gracious and faithful stewardship,  
that all we have, the Lord has entrusted to our care & discipleship...**

**...so the question is, how well are we using the abundance of our lives?**

We each one decide, **we choose how to use** our lives and our resources...  
...focused primarily on acquiring more wealth to fulfill our desires,  
or choosing to respond to God's blessings and abundance  
through our faithful stewardship of God's grace?

I am reminded of something remarkable several years ago  
when we had an unusually large number of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders,  
and it was time to present them with their new Bibles.  
The moderator of the CE committee was concerned about what that  
unusually high expense would do to the rest of their budget.

So the next Sunday, I announced that need in our worship service  
inviting contributions to help defray the cost of student Bibles...  
... and you gave joyfully and generously and overwhelmingly,  
more than double the amount we needed to buy all those Bibles,  
and in fact, **many even thanked me for the opportunity to give.**

It is natural and appropriate that when we know we have been blessed  
that of course we want to express our gratitude, delight and joy...

... and as your pastor, it is a great privilege

to serve such a faithful, generous and amazing church  
for you have been very willing and generous in sharing  
your time, your talents & your financial resources...  
... and you probably don't hear me say "**thank you**" nearly often enough.

And by your efforts, your gifts of time, talents & financial support,  
**God is using this church to accomplish some wonderful things,**  
and we truly are making a real difference in lot of lives,  
and serving the work of building up God's kingdom  
here in our local community & around the world.

We are right now living through a very uncertain time of transition.  
This Covid pandemic has gone on far longer than we expected,  
and too many people are still getting very sick and dying.  
There are no sure answers and it's a difficult challenge to balance  
our concerns about safety and needing to get on with our lives.

When I read about other churches and speak with other pastors,  
I realize how very much we have been incredibly blessed  
for you have been wonderfully supportive and generous.

We have been able to restart many of our church activities & programs,  
without anybody getting sick with Covid from participating here,  
and it looks like we'll end this year with our finances in balance.  
For many of my pastor-colleagues, that's not their situation!

Your stewardship echoes David's prayer, praise & gratitude, vs. 14, 16  
But who are we, that we should be able to make this freewill offering? For all things come from  
you, and of your own have we given you. O LORD our God, all this abundance that we have provided for  
building you a house for your holy name comes from your hand and is all your own.

Like David, I look around amazed by how richly God has blessed us,  
and the incredible abundance that God has entrusted to us,  
**but it runs much deeper and far more significant  
than just the amount of money and time that you've given.**

Several years ago, Ted Turner was all over the news  
when he announced his plans to give a billion dollars  
to the United Nations for some special projects.

Such huge contributions always capture the media's attention  
because we are very impressed by the largest contributions,  
assuming that more is better, **and a lot more is a lot better.**

But in the gospels, especially in Mark,  
**Jesus challenges this world's understanding of value and worth.**

He and the disciples are at the Temple in Jerusalem watching  
as folks are contributing their money into the treasury.

There was in a large courtyard area near the temple entrance,  
where along one wall there were 13 curled brass receptacles  
shaped to look like metal ram's horns, called "shofars".

Whenever people would drop their coins, their offerings into them,  
 they banged and clanged going down these trumpet-like spouts,  
 so that everyone nearby could hear the offering,  
 with the sound indicating the amount they had given.

Seeing the crowds impressed by the wealthy Scribes and their status,  
 Jesus warns -- to look beyond hypocritical appearances,  
 to see past their showy religious façade. vs. 38-40

As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be  
 greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of  
 honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers."

Not fooled by pious appearances or ritually correct worship,  
 Jesus evaluated on a much different criteria. vs. 41-44

He (Jesus) sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the  
 treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins,  
 which are worth a penny.

Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more  
 than all those who are contributing to the treasury.

Apparently, Jesus did not understand the arithmetic of fundraising,  
 for the widow's offering was a pitifully insignificant amount,  
 far too little for anyone even to bother taking notice...  
 ...hardly enough to make any difference in the Temple operating budget.

### **So in what sense had she given more than all the others?**

Jesus explains it in vs. 44b

for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all  
 she had to live on."

His point was, that even after  
 the wealthier folks had made their more substantial offerings  
**they would still continue to be very wealthy people,**  
 for they were giving from their surplus and excess  
 in amounts that would hardly be missed at all.

We focus on the amount of the gift, Jesus, on the heart of the giver,  
**which reveals something about how God views true worth and value.**

The tiny and insignificant offering made by this poor widow  
 was an offering of trust, her total self, a sacrificial gift,  
 for she gave ALL that she had - ALL she had to live on.  
 totally trusting God to provide what she needed...  
**... so her gift was given at great personal sacrifice and risk,**  
**and in fact by giving all she had, she become the gift.**

The point is that the true measure of a gift, is not the amount,  
 but what it costs the giver to give, the giver's trust in God,  
 reflecting the giver's sense of gratitude and commitment to the Lord...  
 ... for it's that sort of giving that leads to exuberant joy!

The widow's sacrifice that seems so extravagant and over the top  
points ahead to the sacrifice Jesus will make in just a few days,  
**the extravagant gift of God's love, mercy and grace to us.**

It's not that Jesus wants us all to give all that we have to live on,  
**... but at the same time, if there is no sacrifice on our part,  
then our offering may be quite a bit less than we think.**

When I was a young boy, on the way to Sunday School each week,  
Dad would give me a dime to drop into the offering plate,  
and the offering was a fairly meaningless gesture to me.

Years later, when I earned my own money doing odd jobs for neighbors,  
my offering became a joyful and meaningful part of worship,  
as an expression of commitment that helped me grow in my faith...  
... for my offering was a making choice not to buy something I wanted.

You see, I needed for my offering to come at some personal cost,  
to give of my own resources, to have **some sacrificial aspect...**  
**... and I needed to make that choice to give at a cost to me.**

**So the question is, is there any real self-sacrifice involved?**  
And, **can I point to anything that I am willing to forgo,  
so that I can give that money, that time, that talent? ...**

... for if my giving is simply a little excess from my surplus,  
if there is no effort, creativity, or sacrifice on my part,  
**then I am missing out on the blessing that might have been mine.**

Stewardship is not about just putting money into an offering plate,  
but includes everything there is about us,  
who we are, what we do and the attitudes **by which we live.**

My pledge is an opportunity to refresh and renew that commitment,  
and to self-examine, to see **if my life is in synch with my faith.**

In Ghana, a favorite and most joyful part of the worship service  
is when the drums and music start, and the whole church stands  
with singing, dancing, swaying and waving handkerchiefs  
as with great flourish & joy they present their offering.

Pew by pew the congregation dances their way up to a plastic washtub  
to drop in whatever money they can, **and even those without funds  
will dance and will give themselves over to the divine joy.**

You see, it's really isn't the money, certainly not the amount,  
but rather, the exuberant joy of giving, - participating with God-  
**- and the money, it's only a symbol of the contents of our hearts.**

During our final hymn, I invite those who are able  
to come forward & even dance a bit

as you present your pledge card,

and even if you've already sent in your pledge,  
if you are able, please still come up to the front  
**as a sign of responding to God by offering yourself...**

... and let that symbolize gratefully-joyfully presenting to God,  
all that we have, all that we value, and all that we are.

Let that be a symbol of gratefully-joyfully **presenting ourselves to God**,  
declaring I want to grow spiritually, for Jesus to be 1<sup>st</sup> in my life.  
and I want to participate in whatever God is up to in this place.

I want to be in on it,  
all the cool stuff that God is doing in and through this church,  
and for God's Spirit and gracious love & healing  
to fill and transform my whole life and being...

... so that together may it be for each one of us,  
**a wonderful celebration of absolute let-loose,**  
**unrestrained and all-out exuberant, happy-dog joy!**