

***IT'S A WORSHIPFUL LIFE***

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Lamington Presbyterian Church

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Joel 2:23-32; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

***“As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation,  
and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight,  
I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”***

– 2 Timothy 4:6-7

The Methodist preacher, William Willimon, tells a story his father once told him, of the bizarre death of one of his colleagues. It happened in the place his dad worked: Chicago’s Field Museum of Natural History.

The Museum, at the time, had a reptile department that included a few live animals. The scientist who died was a herpetologist, a specialist in snakes.

Death came to him late one night. The scientist was working alone, examining a live specimen that had just come into the museum. As he was handling the snake, it bit him.

The man knew the snake was highly poisonous. He also knew there was no one in the building who could help him. Even if there had been someone around, this was a completely new species. There was, as yet, no anti-venom that could save his life.

What the man did next — or, rather, what he *didn't* do — demonstrated that he was a true scientist. He didn't call for help. He didn't go running from the

building. He returned to his desk and started taking notes. Coolly, clinically, he recorded his observations of what was happening to him, minute by minute, until he lost consciousness.

His colleagues found him the next morning, slumped over his desk, dead. But they also found his remarkable notebook. His detailed observations, combined with the medical results of his autopsy, helped others develop an anti-venom. The manner in which he chose to die — his self-sacrifice — saved the lives of others.

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Today's New Testament lesson talks of self-sacrifice. It comes from 2 Timothy: **“As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”** [2 Timothy 4:6-7]

Most biblical scholars today agree the first and second letters to Timothy weren't actually written by the historical Paul. Their date of composition is too late for that. These letters were likely composed by one of Paul's followers: it was a common thing, in the New Testament world, to write what's known today as a pseudonymous epistle — a letter written under a pseudonym, or false name.

It wasn't plagiarism, an attempt to deceive. It was more of a literary convention: much as playwrights put speech into the mouths of characters in their

plays. This author gathered up a number of things Paul probably did say, and put them in the form of a letter to his real-life protégé, Timothy. It was a way of getting the apostle — who, by then, had already been martyred for the faith — to speak to the problems of the new generation.

Anyway, the character of Paul, in the letter, says, “I am already being poured out as a libation.”

Now, you may think you know what a libation is. It’s a drink: an alcoholic one, at that. If a group of office workers head down to the local watering-hole after work, for “libations,” you know what they mean. It’s a genteel euphemism for “Happy Hour.”

To the ancient Romans, “libation” meant something different. Yes, it was a drink: but it wasn’t one they actually drank.

The Romans’ religious life, as you may know, was characterized by sacrifices. Every Roman city proudly displayed its pillared temples, dedicated to various gods. What the Romans did inside those temples was offer sacrifices. Sometimes you’d pay for a small animal, and have it slaughtered. Other times, you’d bring a basket of grain – that was known as a cereal offering. And sometimes you’d show up with a cup of the finest wine, walk up to the altar and pour it all out. The sacrifice of poured-out wine was known as a libation.

A libation was different from the other sacrifices. In the case of meat, char-broiled in a brazier, the priests of the temple would either eat it themselves for dinner, or sell it in the marketplace. The same went for the baskets of grain. Yet, if you upended a cup and watched the dark red wine run down the sides of the altar, you knew it was a total loss.

The libation was the closest thing to a pure sacrifice — for no one (other than, perhaps, the pagan god, as they once believed) would ever derive any benefit from it.

When Paul says, “I am already being poured out as a libation,” he’s announcing that his days are numbered. The letters to Timothy are set in the time when Paul was in prison, in Rome. Surely, trapped in that dire situation, the apostle could read the writing on his cell wall.

Paul had been in and out of prison before, in various provincial cities, but this time was different. Always, in the past — through a combination of earnest testimony and legal knowledge (plus the occasional miracle) — Paul had managed to convince the local authorities to let him go. This time, though, his case has been remanded to Rome. This time, he’s not likely to leave the prison alive: and he knows it.

In short, these are the words of a man who’s fully prepared to perform the

ultimate act of self-giving. Paul's ready to sacrifice himself: to pour his very life out as a libation, a love-offering to his Lord, Jesus Christ.

As he contemplates his own death, Paul's led to look back on his life: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." The image shifts from the altar of a temple to an athletic stadium. Paul's comparing himself to a long-distance runner, standing on the far side of the finish line, hands on knees, gasping to fill his lungs with air. The race is finished. He knows that — despite anything his Roman jailers may do to him — he has already triumphed!

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In the coming weeks, most of us are going to have the opportunity to consider a sacrificial gift of our own. Not a gift on the same scale as the one offered by Paul: but one that's still in the same tradition. It happens every year, about this time. It's not going to be a libation, as Paul describes it. It's just going to be an estimate of giving for the coming year. If you or I do this thing faithfully and well, our estimate of giving for 2020 *will* have something of an air of sacrifice about it.

How much to give? That's the question.

It's not something I can answer for you. It's never been our tradition, in modern times, for the church to tell members exactly what to give.

We used to do that, you know, in Colonial times. Back in the stairwell leading up to the choir loft, hanging on the wall, there's a page from an ancient ledger of pew rents, from our church's first building (which was located across the street). Pew rents used to be how Presbyterians did stewardship. Once a year, the church would come 'round collecting these rents. If you paid up, the pew was yours, for you and your family to use, all through the year. The ones up front cost a little more; the ones toward the back, a little less. (I know that's just the opposite of the way some of you think, but they were pretty zealous, back in Colonial days!)

If you didn't — or couldn't — come up with the expected rent, you had to go sit in the balcony.

We do have a few suggestions, today, as to how to give — and, if you've been around the church for a while, you've probably heard someone speak of them before. But, it does bear repeating from time to time. Christian stewardship is meant to be three things: **regular**, **proportionate** and **sacrificial**.

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What do I mean by **regular**? For many people, that means weekly (though monthly works fine, also — or even annually, if the gift comes in the form of something like shares of stock). The point is, you and I are meant to make our

giving to God a part of our regular budget — as regular as the telephone bill or the electric bill or the health-club membership fee. Christian stewardship isn't limited just to those days we come to worship. It's meant to be an ongoing part of our daily lives.

Second, Christian stewardship is meant to be **proportionate**. That means it ought to be based on a percentage of income, rather than a dollar amount. The biblical tithe — historically, 10% of income — was the original inspiration for the percentage standard.

Rather than asking yourself, “How much should I give?” ask yourself, “How much has God blessed me?” Then decide what percentage of those financial blessings you'll return to do the Lord's work. If you start with that question – and really consider its implications, you're likely to be generous in your giving. Proportionate givers are joyful givers: because, every time we sit down to write a check, or make that electronic payment, we're not just paying a bill. We're engaging in an act of worship.

Finally, Christian stewardship is meant to be **sacrificial**. Here's where Paul's talk about being poured out as a libation comes into play. Whatever amount you and I ultimately choose to give, it ought to feel like it's more than we can afford. They used to say, in the church, “Give until it hurts” — but I never much

liked that expression. It sounds kind of masochistic, if you ask me. It sounds like it glorifies pain, for pain's sake. I'd much rather say, "make a sacrifice to the Lord." (At least that's biblical!) C.S. Lewis once said, "I do not believe one can settle how much we are to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare."

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Susan Andrews is a friend of mine: a retired minister who, some years back, was Moderator of the General Assembly. Susan once suggested in a sermon to her church that there are three ways of giving. She called them **grudge giving**, **drudge giving** and **thanks giving**. Here's how it works itself out...

Sooner or later you hold in your hands a letter from the church, describing the stewardship campaign. Not long after that, when you come to church on Stewardship Sunday — this year it's November 10 — you'll be handed an estimate of giving card. It asks you to fill in whatever amount you plan to give in the coming year.

How do you respond? Maybe the first thought that comes to mind is, "Here we go again. All the church ever wants is money! I've got so many bills piled up, so many things I want to buy — why, this stewardship thing is cramping my style! I wonder if I can get away with the same amount as last year? I guess I'd better

write something in, just to get them off my back!”

(Did you notice, by the way, the pronoun? It’s “the church, they,” or “the church, them” – never, “my church.” Try sitting down with an estimate of card and asking, “What should I give to advance the work of *my* church?” Kind of changes your whole perspective, doesn’t it?) That, anyway, is **grudge giving**.

Then there’s **drudge giving**. This approach goes something like this. “Oh, great. Here’s the estimate of giving card again. Didn’t I just fill one of those out? I hate this process! Every time I look at that blank space, and try to figure out what to write in, it makes me feel inadequate. I know I should be more generous. I know I ought to raise my pledge. But it feels so painful to do it. Oh well, I’d better do it anyway. It’s like what they say down at the gym: no pain, no gain!”

Where’s the joy in that? There’s precious little joy in drudge giving. It’s a tangled web of “shoulds” and “oughts.” That’s because it’s all about guilt. Drudge giving is why certain people hate the fall stewardship season. The whole subject just makes them feel guilty!

God doesn’t want you to feel guilty, as you plan what to give to advance the ministry and mission of your church. God wants the experience of giving to be liberating: a positive joy! As the scripture says, “God loves a cheerful giver” [2 Corinthians 9:7].

But — how to make it so? That's the question. The only way to become a truly cheerful giver is to practice not grudge giving, not drudge giving, but *thanks* giving.

Here's how this works. You take out the estimate of giving card and set it before you. Before you even start thinking about what to write in on that line, you ask yourself, "How has the Lord blessed me, this past year?" Then, you start mentally listing those things money can't buy: family, friends, a church community, and work to do that has meaning, and even the gift of life itself. Let those thoughts rattle around in your mind for a little while. Before you know it, that estimate of giving — for you — will be positively transformed! It will become not some sort of bill to be paid, and not a burden of guilt to be expiated, but an act of worship — yes, an act of worship, a means of glorifying God!

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You may have heard the name of Sir John Templeton. He was a billionaire Wall Street investor: and a Presbyterian.

Starting from humble beginnings, Templeton built his fortune by picking stocks. He started a mutual fund business that made him — and his investors — a great deal of money. Then, like some very wealthy people before him, he became a philanthropist. For years, he chaired the Board of Directors of Princeton

Seminary. He established the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, which is kind of like the Nobel Prize. He also funded all sorts of projects to reconcile science and religion: one of his favorite causes. John Templeton did these things because they brought him joy.

Anyway, somebody asked him what is the secret of wealth. His response was the simplest, most obvious observation imaginable: yet, it was also deeply profound. This wizard of Wall Street said the secret of wealth is: “Gratitude. If you’re not grateful, you’re not rich — no matter how much you have.”

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We’re so used to measuring wealth in dollars. But dollars aren’t a measure of wealth at all: they’re a measure of money. Wealth is something different. It’s much deeper than the mere accumulation of money and possessions. It has more to do with us – with *who we are* – than with anything we own. It has to do with our attitude, our outlook on life.

There are people in this world known as misers — and you know the word “miser” is contained within the word “miserable.” That’s no accident. Misers are people who possess money without gratitude.

Most people think misers are very wealthy people: but they don’t have to be. Miserliness is an equal-opportunity condition. Among all the people of this

world, misers are actually the most impoverished. That's because their financial holdings are, to them, a fountainhead of fear and paranoia.

Misers truly believe they are "self-made men," or "self-made women." They believe they, and they alone, are responsible for what financial success they may enjoy. God has nothing to do with it, as far as they're concerned: so what's the point in feeling thankful?

You don't need to be rich to be a miser. All you need to do is possess money without gratitude.

If you can make the act of filling out an estimate of giving card an act of genuine gratitude, you'll find that it transforms not only the process of stewardship, but your whole life as well. In this sense, an estimate of giving card can be nothing less than a ticket to freedom.

Wouldn't you like to be free of financial worries? The best way to do that is to consciously practice gratitude. Begin each day by thanking God, profoundly and with your whole heart, for all the things you have and are. In time, you will come to number yourself among the wealthiest people on this earth.

So practice gratitude, along with your giving: do that, and I promise you will find yourself affirming, with Paul, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Then, you will discover joy without end!

Let us pray:

**Bless our hands, O Lord, to the work of giving.**

**Bless our minds, O Lord, to thoughts of generosity.**

**Bless our hearts, O Lord, to the joy of helping others.**

**For we ask it in Jesus' name.**

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