

I'm sure this has happened to you. You go to the doctor with a complaint. Doc, I don't know what's wrong, I don't know what I did to my neck, but whenever I lay on my stomach and raise up both my right arm and my head, my neck REALLY HURTS!

And the doctor listens. Mmmhmmm... And he gives sound medical advice: Don't do that.

Now, let's try it a different way.

You come to me, and we sit down in my office to talk. Pastor Taylor, I don't know what's going on, but whenever I come to worship, I just, feel connected to God--I feel like it helps me enter the week differently and I'm more aware of God's presence and God using me.

And I, your pastor, listen. Mmmhmmm... And I give sound pastoral advice: Keep doing that!

"Keep doing that. Do it over and over. Do it intentionally. Keep doing that thing that draws you toward God's heart, and into God's life. Do those practices of the faith: worship, prayer, study, service, giving, confession, celebration. Schedule them in your calendar. Set a reminder. These are the practices of Christian faith, the ways that we learn to find God present with us in the everyday. These are the ways that we get to experience the redemption and transformation that God is doing. Many--maybe all--of us have those experiences, those rare, holy moments, when God seems so near. The practices of faith, these spiritual disciplines, are about making those moments a regular occurrence, learning to connect with God, to sort of "sync up" with God.

Paul makes it clear that the practice of giving shapes our lives to look like God's life. He begins with generosity as a mark of God's life, something we can notice about God's action in the world. Our God is a giving God. Though we often fail to see it, God is giving, day after day, after day. We might decide that we have earned what we have, or maybe we have benefited from a bit of good luck, but Paul takes us back to the source of all gifts. That loaf of bread in your pantry might seem to be the outcome of a fairly basic economic transaction, but Paul reminds us that the seed for that bread was the gift of God; the sun and rain that grew the grain, those are the gifts of God. The money in your pocket might be the result of a basic arrangement, where you perform a service or produce a product, and someone gives you a paycheck, but Paul reminds us that the strength of body and mind that enable you to work--those are the gifts of God; a new day with the sun coming up over the horizon, this is the gift of God. And, one gift leads to another; as Jesus says in our earlier text from Luke, "Generosity begets generosity."

And God does more than just entrust us with gifts; God also entrusts us with generosity. These last verses from Corinthians are translated to say, "You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous in every way." But the paraphrase is much more succinct: it says, "God gives you something you can then give away." God, you see...God gives recyclable gifts; gifts that are not meant to sit on the shelf, but are meant to be shared, given away, and then given again, and again, and again, until all have received a blessing. Have you seen the tv show, *Hoarders*? When we hang on to the gifts we are given--the gifts that come to us from God, that often come through others, when we hang on to them, our lives become like a hoarder's house: unnaturally full of stuff that we can't use anymore. When we give a gift away, we give a bit of ourselves with it. And then, in the giving, we, ourselves, become a gift; we become a blessing, and we join in the activity of God. Theologians would say that we join in the "economy" of God.

Now, giving is a broad term. We could talk about all kinds of giving--giving our time, giving our energy--giving doesn't necessarily need to be just about money. But when we're honest, money is a powerful gift. Jesus was on to something when he told us "Where your treasure is, that's where your heart is." If you want to know what you love, look at your bank statement--it'll tell you. Money is one of the greatest contributors to stress and anxiety in each of our lives; money is the leading cause of distress in marriage, and it's a leading factor in divorce. Money holds a lot of power in our lives; and sometimes we let it hold more power than God. It governs our decisions, even over against our faith in God as the one we can trust to provide what we need. So how we practice giving really matters.

I don't know about you, but for me, the times when I have feared that there was not enough money, those are the times when God has acted to turn me back to the real source of my life. In our seminary days, when Brad and I were in school preparing to become pastors, Brad was in South Carolina and I was in North Carolina before we were married. And I can remember time after time, listening to him wonder and worry where the money was going to come from to fix his car, or to pay his rent. And time and again, a check would arrive just on time. Like manna from heaven, he always seemed to have enough on the day when he needed it. But, you know, the checks didn't arrive from heaven. They came from Nebraska. They were the gifts of farmers who took the gifts they had been given, and literally gave them away. And in the giving, they themselves became a gift. They themselves taught us that it really was possible to give sacrificially--this tiny Nebraska farming community year after year sent thousands of dollars to pay for Brad's education, in four years, they sent more than 30 thousand dollars. They didn't know they were doing it, but they taught us that we could trust God and God's faithful people. And they taught us to give--not

to give out of what was left over, but to give enough that when the check went into the plate, a piece of us went in there with it.

When my practice is to hold onto these gifts, I can feel my grip tightening on it; and if I'm really paying attention, I can feel that money's grip is tightening on me. I can feel it becoming the determining, controlling factor of my life. Practicing Giving counteracts the tyranny of money in our lives. It weakens its grip on us. Giving opens us to the truth that we cannot provide for ourselves all that we need--we are not self-sufficient. We give, and we find ourselves in need, and then our eyes are open to see when and how God will provide for us, how God will rearrange or reshape our lives so that we have enough. In the practice of giving we learn, day by day, to trust that God is present, that God is near, that God knows our circumstances.

Sometimes this seems too big. Too idealistic, too overwhelming. I do believe that God has given us tools to help us learn, one step at a time, to make this change--Dave Ramsey's work and his class called Financial Peace University is one great tool to help us in practicing ways to reshape our lives and change our relationship with money, so that I can faithfully manage what's in my wallet; rather than my wallet controlling me.

Even with such tools at hand, I confess that it can even be overwhelming for those of us who direct the financial stewardship of the church. Keeping a church running is no small financial challenge, and our Business Manager and finance chair and I sweat bullets all year long, as if someone had told us that if we stress more, then more money will appear. This mentality has affected the way that we pay our apportionments. Apportionments are the funds that we covenant to give from our individual congregation to the overall United Methodist Church. Through the funds that we offer, our mission is extended, and we are able to be part of ministry far beyond what we alone could do as a congregation. Many of the dollars we send come back to fund local ministry by providing us resources here in Houston, but they also do things like providing tablet readers to pastors and seminary students in places where books are hard to get. They fund internships and missionary programs for young people. They provide the Methodist Church with staff to organize our shared work and our mission together.

More than all of this, the apportionment system is the way that our congregation lives out God's command to pass on a first fruits offering for the work of the body of Christ. Instead of giving our first fruits--a portion off of the top of what is received in offering--our practice has been to give when we think we can spare it, often waiting until the end of the year to see how our own income looks. Friends, what we practice does not sound like what we believe. We believe that, whether as individuals or as a church,

this practice of giving is a mark of our discipleship, but more importantly, it is a means of grace--it is something that God uses to grow our faith. For many of us, jumping up to the Biblical Standard of tithing--giving 10% of our income--is a huge stretch, and so I have invited you to simply start somewhere--to start at 3% or 5%--start at a place from which God may begin to stretch you, to show you who is really behind those gifts, and to show you what they can do. And from there, from that starting place, grow up to that 10% tithe.

Just this past week, the finance committee of this church has voted to take that same step: to start somewhere. So, as our starting place, we have committed to revive the practice of giving first; we, Westbury Church, will pass on the first 5% of the church's offering each week, rain or shine. Rather than holding these gifts here, and wondering and hoping that they will be enough, we will receive those gifts, and then to turn around and pass them on for the Church's wider mission in the world--so that we might be a gift, a blessing to somebody else.

Now, I'd be lying if I said this didn't make me nervous. And I think that Steve Ewing and Phil Miller who head our Finance team would agree. But all week long as I have thought about this decision, and as I've thought about whether I will be kicking myself in July, I keep coming back to this: Lord, we believe; help our unbelief. And I think back, and remember that the decisions in life that have made me the most nervous, the ones that have tested my faith, have turned out to be the ones that God has used to grow my faith the most, and to reshape my life.

I pray that it would be so for us. I pray that, by the practice of giving, we might be led back in gratitude to the one who has given us everything, and we might find the courage to live transformed lives.

Thanks be to God. Amen.