



VILLAGE
CHURCH
Presbyterian (USA)

Healing Through the Gifts of Money

SCRIPTURE:
Isaiah 55:
1-5

Nov. 24, 2024 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

Here was the Sunday morning routine for the Nishioka household. Some of you know that my father was the pastor of the Japanese Presbyterian Church in downtown, central Seattle. We lived in the northern part of Seattle. We only had one car. Part of being a pastor's kid was you were the first ones to be there and the last ones to leave. In order for us to get in the car, we had to have the Bible that had our particular name on it. Each of us had been given a Bible with our names on it. There were lots of Bibles in the house, but it couldn't be any Bible. And then we also had to have our offering envelope. All of us had our own little box. Each Sunday we pulled out an offering envelope, and by the way, we learned that something had to be in it—preferably money. We tried just having the envelope by itself, but Dad noticed and that was not good. We had to have money in there. That was the routine. We couldn't get in the car unless that happened. And when God was gracious and we were faithful on Saturday evenings, the four Nishioka boys would put our Bibles with our offering envelopes with money in it stacked next to the desk, which was by the front door.

Those were the great mornings because Dad would get anxious about getting to church early and we would get in the car on time and life would be wonderful and the Holy Spirit would be faithful and true. Those were rare mornings in our household. Sadly, there was more scrambling on Sunday mornings—trying to find Bibles, trying to find offering, trying to find money. This was not a new routine, but we weren't the brightest of God's children. Jason would not know where his Bible was. We'd scour the house. Dad is by the door. You can feel him getting angrier and angrier. I would have an offering envelope and a Bible because I'm amazing, but my other brothers would not. Brandon would have an envelope, but no

money. And then he would go to Garfield who always had money, and Garfield would negotiate with him on the lending terms. Would the interest be compounded daily or weekly?

I remember one morning we were in the back, all four of us. It had been a bad morning and Dad was mad. We're going to worship Jesus because we love him. Mom turned to my Dad and said, "Dick, this is not the way that we should be going to church together as a family." Dad was grumbling and in the back and we were like, "You go, mom!" But we didn't say anything because we're not that dumb, right? We knew that we were in trouble already.

I remember my first paid job was Baskin Robbins, which you may think is an odd job in Seattle but people came to get ice cream year round at Baskin Robbins by Green Lake. I got my first paycheck and it was \$47 after two weeks of part-time work. And Dad looked at it. I was kind of proud. And he said, "Okay, Roddy, so that means \$4.70 goes into your offering envelope on Sunday." And I said, "That's my money." And then Dad said, "Roddy, have a seat." And I was like: Dang, because that meant we were going to have a conversation. And then he reached for his Bible, and I knew it was going to be bad.

He opened to Psalm 24:1, which says, "the Earth is the Lord's and everything in it belongs to God, the creatures in it and everything that abides on the face of the earth." Dad said, "When you said 'my money,' clearly you were wrong because the psalmist says everything in the earth, all the creatures, it all belongs to God. So actually what you're doing is returning it to God—a portion of that which God has given to you. In fact, God is so gracious, God lets you keep 90% of that \$47 you made from Baskin Robbins. You just have to give 10% and put it into your offering envelope and give it back to God." Dad talked about stewardship; that everything, all creation, has been

given to humankind and we're supposed to be stewards of it. That was a new concept for me.

"So you have to give back part of what you have to say thank you to God?" "It's how we say thank you over and over again." It was a new idea to me to be stewards of all that God has given to us; that it wasn't not mine. It is the Lord's.

So that's exactly what the prophet Isaiah is saying to the Hebrew people who are in exile in Babylon in 587, before the common era. The Babylonians swoop in and they conquer Judea, the Southern kingdom, and they burn down the temple and they destroy the city of Jerusalem and they take them back into Babylon. That's what the ancient world would do when they conquered other peoples: Decimate their lands and take people into exile. They took the artists and the teachers, they took the athletes and the leaders. They took the brightest minds, the scholars, and the strongest, the most attractive slaves as well.

The Hebrew people are in exile for 70 years and Isaiah is worried that they're forgetting who they are and to whom they belong. Seventy years is a long time. There were some people there who didn't even know what it was like; they were born in Babylon. They didn't know what it was like to be in Jerusalem.

The prophet Isaiah speaks to the Hebrew people in exile and says, "Listen, all of you, everyone come to the waters come, and those of you who have no money, buy and eat, buy wine and milk (two symbols of abundance), buy wine and milk without money and without price." Then the prophet says to all the people, "And you who have money, why do you spend your money on that which is not bread, doesn't have any substance? Why do you waste your money on that which is not even meaningful? And your labor—on that which does not satisfy?" The prophet Isaiah, speaks God's words to two populations. 1) The poor, those who don't have any money to enjoy God's abundance. 2) Those who have money, who are wasting money on things that don't satisfy. Things that are meaningless.

God says, "Draw near to me and give your money to that which feeds you, feeds your soul, your body, your heart, your mind, and let others be fed as well so that you may live. See, I am forming a covenant with you just like I formed with King David. In years to come, right? That you will belong to me and I will belong to you. And when you do this, when you spend

your money on things that matter, then people you don't even know will be drawn to you. They will run to you and you will welcome them at your Thanksgiving table." It's a marvelous word for you and for me on the Sunday before our Thanksgiving celebrations: People you don't even know will come to you because they want to also experience the grace and the love of Jesus Christ, of God, of the presence of the Spirit.

One of my good friends was called to be pastor of the Fort Street Presbyterian Church in the heart of downtown Detroit. Fort Street is this gorgeous, neogothic building, almost 180 years old. Fort Street, at its highest point, had more than 1,000 members. Leaders of the city of Detroit worshiped there. The building is on the National Historic Register—it's an amazing place. But as downtown Detroit struggled, so did Fort Street Presbyterian Church, where my friend Sharon was called. The congregation had dwindled to about 200 people. They were doing their best to keep up the building, but they were worried.

Sharon arrived in May. In mid July, she got this big packet in the mail from the Detroit Free Press, which is the newspaper for the city of Detroit, largest newspaper in Michigan. The Detroit Free Press sponsors the Detroit Marathon on the third Sunday every October. It is the only international marathon in North America. The Detroit Marathon starts in downtown Detroit. They run across the Ambassador Bridge. They travel underneath in the Windsor Detroit tunnel to Canada and back. It's one of the qualifying marathons for the Boston Marathon. So consequently, it's an incredible marathon. As Sharon was reading, she discovered that about 22,000 people would be at the start of the marathon. There was also a kids' marathon and a half marathon. About 240,000 people, almost a quarter of a million, would line the route. She looked at the map and discovered that the last long stretch of the marathon ran right down Fort Street. And the finish line was about a mile and a half away from the church.

Sharon brought the packet to the session in August at their regular meeting. She says, "I got this packet last month from the Detroit Free Press." And collectively, her 12 elders groaned. They said, "Oh, Reverend, this is the worst possible day. It is a terrible day. We've been through this so many times. There are detours everywhere from early in the

morning until late in the afternoon. In fact, we've talked about canceling worship on that day because it is such a hassle to get downtown. There are people everywhere. There's cars everywhere and all these signs. Almost a quarter of a million people will be in the downtown area. It is a crazy, crazy time."

Sharon said, "I read that the last stretch is right in front of our church." They said, "Yeah, it's terrible. It's just so terrible." And she said, "I was wondering, we have these two huge sets of doors. I've only been here two and a half months, but I've never seen them open. Do we ever open those doors on Fort Street?" And Charlie, one of the elders said, "Why would we open those doors? Everyone knows that you park in the back and you come through the back entrance." Sharon said, "I know, but just out of curiosity, it is Fort Street and we're right here." Ed said, "Well, we don't open those doors. I haven't seen those doors opened in years. They may not even open now." "I'm just curious. I thought maybe on that third Sunday in October, we might open those doors." Ben said, "Why would we do that, Reverend?"

Sharon said, "Because there are people coming through. I thought we could open the doors." And then Jenny, who was the oldest elder and very quiet, said under her breath, "We could serve coffee." And Charlie said, "I'm sorry. We are going to serve coffee to the people? Just walk into our building and we're going to serve them coffee? Who's going to pay for that? What budget will that come from?" Jenny smiled and said, "We could serve coffee, and hot chocolate with marshmallows." Ben was like: "This is crazy talk. We're not going to open the doors to strangers. People just walk in here? We're not going to give them a coffee. We could charge for the coffee and the marshmallows and the hot chocolate." Sharon said, "I'm just wondering, just curious."

She left it there to her credit and finished the meeting. Two weeks later, she was upstairs in her office and hears all this commotion, clanging, hammering, and goes downstairs. Ben and Charlie and Ed

are working on the huge doors. "Hi, gentlemen, what are you doing?" Charlie said, "I just got curious to see if we could open them. We're trying to see." An hour and a half later, they came upstairs. "Why don't you come see this?" And she comes downstairs and they've got one set of the doors open to Fort Street.

As they're talking, a young couple goes by with their dog, and see the three men and pastor Sharon, and they say, "Hey, so, is this church open?" Ed says, "Of course it's open. It's a church." "Oh. We've been here for a little over a month. We bought a condo in that refurbished factory down the street. We've walked by here. We've never seen these doors open." "Well, everyone knows to go in the back," Ed said. They said thank you and walked on.

Two weeks later, Ed, Charlie, and Ben brought two more gentlemen to help open the other set of doors. On the third Sunday in October, the day of the marathon, they had those doors open. Complete strangers walked in to use the restroom.

The Monday after the marathon, the Detroit Free Press always runs stories about the runners and their amazing times—pages and pages online and in print. And montage photos from the previous day. And one of the scenes was of a ruling elder from Fort Street Presbyterian Church named Jenny, bending down, handing a cup of hot chocolate with marshmallows to a little girl who is clearly delighted.

Isaiah speaks the word of God to the people of God and says, "So why do you spend your money on things that don't satisfy? No, God says, incline your ear to me and listen, and you will delight in the food that I will give to you. And when you welcome everyone to your tables, then you'll be surprised because people you don't even know will run to you because they also want to enjoy this amazing feast that I have prepared for all of your friends."

Healing of the nations through the gifts of our time and talents and our treasure. In the name of the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.