

SERMON TITLE: "What's It Mean to Be a United Methodist? Gifts"
SERMON TEXT: 2 Chronicles 31:1-10
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: September 24, 2023, at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

I like to watch detective shows on television. And, of course, they almost always begin with a homicide. Once the detectives arrive at the scene, they must first figure out the identity of the victim. Then usually most of the program is devoted to determining the identity of the suspected murderer. To do their sleuthing work, the detectives rely on any available documents, they gain evidence from the location of the body, they talk to potential witnesses, they rule out people with alibis, they connect the dots between persons who might have some kind of motive to kill, they get information from the autopsy, and they obtain search warrants to look for more evidence. Sometimes the detectives trace people through automobile license plates, telephone records, criminal history, or DNA. Sometimes they can track a person's movements by their use of credit cards. Security camera footage comes in handy. And British detectives, especially, rely a lot on CCTV to figure out the identity of persons of interest. Maybe because conflict and challenge creates better TV drama, those in possession of information often are reluctant to give it. But occasionally, a crime drama character is eager to offer identifying information as if it were a gift to the police.

If you've been in worship the past two Sundays, you know that I've been talking to you about identity—specifically, our United Methodist identity as described by our membership vows to uphold our church by our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. Having already discussed *prayers* and *presence*, and saving our volunteer *service* for next week, today our focus is going to be on material and monetary contributions. So, on this third Sunday of the series, I invite you into the Old Testament story in Second Chronicles chapter 31, where we can explore our United Methodist identity through the key word "gifts."

1—BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

Let's start with some biblical background. Some of you may remember that Saul was the first king of Israel. The second king was David, who became famous for his ability to unite and grow the kingdom. David had some serious moral failings, but he was also given credit for writing, or at least *underwriting*, many of the Psalms of worship. Thus, David was remembered as a spiritual leader. David's son Solomon also had a great legacy. During King Solomon's reign, the Jewish temple was built, and the kingdom was characterized by wisdom and peace. But, after Solomon died, things went badly. Internal conflict caused the kingdom to split, North and South, also known as Israel and Judah. From then on, each kingdom had its own kings, most of whom led their people astray from God and weakened their nations. Consequently, the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to Assyria in 721 BCE, and many of the Israelites were carried away into Assyrian captivity.

To the south in Judah, King Hezekiah was doing a much better job of respecting God and governing his nation—or at least he started doing better when he learned what terrible consequences could occur. King Hezekiah called for all the people of Judah to put away their idol worship and come to the temple in Jerusalem, where they held a massive two-week-long Passover celebration. That intense worship experience revived the people's faith in God and filled them with great joy. Their spiritual rededication also inspired them to tear down their pagan worship shrines, so they wouldn't be tempted to return to false religious beliefs and practices.

Having all those worshipers come there to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration impressed upon King Hezekiah the quantity of material goods and infrastructure they would need to keep this kind of religious experience going. Second Chronicles 30:24 mentions that, for the Passover event, Hezekiah and other officials had provided 2000 bulls and 17,000 sheep. Wherever people are gathered, there must be provisions to feed them. Livestock and grain were also required for the Jewish sacrificial rituals. Plus, the management of all those worshipers and all those religious services required professional

priests trained in the Jewish laws and dedicated to the work. Therefore, the priests wouldn't have time to raise their own crops and animals, and others would have to provide a livelihood for them. In other words, for the nation and the spiritual health of the people to stay strong, material and financial gifts would definitely be required.

2—CHAPTER 31

That's the background leading up to chapter 31. Then we get into the details of this chapter, where we see how on-going gifts were acquired to keep the people's faith alive after they returned to their own cities and homes. Verse three tells us that King Hezekiah contributed from his own possessions for the burnt offerings that occurred every morning, evening, Sabbath, new moon, and festival day. That means the king, the one with the greatest resources, took this seriously and made a significant contribution. Then verse four tells us that King Hezekiah "commanded the people who lived in Jerusalem" to provide for the needs of the priests. In other words, Hezekiah knew what was needed, and he didn't hesitate to expect it of his people. Verse five then indicates that the people throughout Judah and Israel began bringing "grain, wine, oil, honey, and all the produce of the field."

It's worthy of note, not only *that* the Jewish people brought these items, but *how* they brought them. Verse five tells us that they brought them from the "first fruits." That means they gave these gifts right away, as economic priorities. We also see that these gifts were given in "abundance" and that they were "tithed." In verse six, we see that the people also brought in "tithes," or 10%, of their cattle and sheep and other dedicated things. In verses seven through 10, we see that, as a result of their tithing, the ministry at the temple had plenty for all they needed to accomplish. Because of all the gifts that were donated to the Jewish ministry, the priests had enough to eat, the officials were grateful, and the people throughout the country were blessed by God. The message of 2 Chronicles is clear. At this particular time in the history of the Jewish people, they benefitted greatly because they were identified by their gifts.

3—UM GIFTS

So, now, let's talk about our United Methodist identity. Giving gifts is an important characteristic for us, as well. As United Methodists, we come out of the Judeo-Christian tradition of giving abundant gifts. We have these biblical roots where tithing has been taught as a foundational principle for spiritual health of the individual, the family, the congregation, and the nation. I know that you all are keenly aware of the practice of our neighbors in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. While we may not agree with them on all points of religious doctrine, we do share with them the traditional Christian teaching about tithing our income.

John Wesley, who founded the Methodist movement in the 1700s, is well-known for saying, "Earn all you can; save all you can; give all you can." Those who have studied John Wesley's journals know that he lived on a very small percentage of his income and gave most of it away. His idea of saving money wasn't keeping it in a bank. By "saving," Wesley meant not spending wastefully on things we don't really need. Wesley's idea was that, by earning as well as we're able and by not wastefully spending on ourselves, we then will have more that we can give away. John Wesley cared deeply for the sick, orphans, and the poor, and he knew that our individual abilities are different. The quantities we are able to earn, save, and give are not all the same. So, he was challenging himself and other capable people to make the most of our abilities so that we have as much as possible that we can give away to support faith development for all of us and to care for those in need. For nearly four centuries, as much as possible, Methodist people have been characterized by generous and charitable gifts.

This United Methodist identity of giving gifts is evident in our very own church building. When I was appointed to Ogden First UMC 10 years ago, I was truly amazed at what this congregation had been able to accomplish. Moving from the old downtown church location out to this brand new building in 2008 was nothing short of miraculous. And that miracle was a collaborative effort between God and the generous people of this congregation who were supporting a \$7000 per month mortgage payment, on

top of utilities and staff salaries. Fortunately, we were able to refinance our mortgage, so we've *only* been having to pay \$5000/month in recent years. Without very high levels of giving, however, we would not be worshipping here today. So, on behalf of all of us who enjoy worshipping here today, I want to express a giant "Thank you!" to those of you who have given generous gifts to support this ministry.

And, of course, ministry isn't just about our building. As our congregation's vision statement indicates, "First United Methodist Church will meet spiritual needs, by developing relationships with Christ, community, and the world." Our primary concern is spiritual—to convey and increase Christian faith through preaching, teaching, music, fellowship, and caring for one another. Our spiritual mission also leads us to look beyond our congregation to be in relationships of caring with our community and world. That mission can only be done with financial support. Our spiritual calling challenges and inspires us United Methodists to be a people who generously share gifts.

CONCLUSION

There's a guy I know who's a member of Community United Methodist Church in Washington Terrace. I've gotten to know John because he serves on a United Methodist board with me. John has a peculiar sense of humor, so I never quite know what he might say. But one thing he periodically does throughout the year is send out an email to me and some other United Methodist friends announcing how many shopping days are left before Christmas. Last week's red and green email from John declared that there were only 99 days left to buy our Christmas gifts.

If that fact makes you groan, like it does me, maybe we can at least appreciate John's reminder of our United Methodist identity. We United Methodists are characterized by gifts.