

“How We Give: We Are But Tenants”

Leviticus 25:18-23

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For the first year and a half we were married, we rented. Then with two jobs in hand (back when they called us DINKS: double income, no kids) we bought our first home. Since then, there have been only two times when we were tenants. The first time was in 1996 after our house burned down. We moved with our three young children into a rental house for seven months while our home was being rebuilt. It was a stressful time, but some good things came of it.

First came the realization that we simply had to “hold all things lightly”. It was all just stuff, and all of the sudden stuff didn’t matter. Our children were safe; the babysitter had not been injured. I will never forget standing in the charred ruins of our home the day after the fire. My friend Brenda said, “Let it go. Just let it go.”

Next came the realization that very big and bad things could **and would** happen to us. *Even to us* who carefully planned and executed just about everything in our lives. This was a spiritual turning point for me. It made me examine just who or what I was depending on. It forced me to ask the question, “Where is my treasure?” I began to realize in a very concrete way that I could no longer put my trust in money, or things, or even myself. The seeds for how I would spend the rest of my life were planted in the ashes of our burned home.

Finally there was the freedom we discovered in renting a home, rather than owning it. If you have been a homeowner for any length of time and then you go to rent, you will know exactly what I am talking about. No repairs, no landscaping, minimal yard work, no decorating. You don’t need to unpack things; you don’t need to put things up on the wall if you don’t want to.

This freedom of camping out in a home happened again after we moved to Dallas in December and rented a house. It’s amazing how much it frees you up when you know it’s temporary. You don’t worry about it. We had more time and energy for other things, more important things.

When considering the stewardship of money, there are many different angles the preacher can take. The gospels are chock full of times when Jesus talked about money,

wealth, and giving. Jesus talked about money more than any other subject except for the kingdom of God. Jesus talked about money so much because he knows how much we love it. He knows how much it fills up our lives with busyness, distraction, and worry. He knows what a burden it is.

But for today's reflection we turn not to the gospels but to the Old Testament. This Leviticus reading stands out because it is a firm statement about who the owner is and who we are in relationship to God.

Scripture urges us to pay close attention to the fact that we are only tenants in this thing we call life. Today we celebrate All Saints Day and we remember the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us. We remember famous people, like the ones we heard about in scripture, and we remember the personal saints, those people we have known and loved. This, too, reminds us that we are only tenants. Our time here is temporary. Our very bodies are not our own. Our money is not our own. These are theological truths.

But I would also suggest it is also okay to think more concretely when we consider giving our money. It's okay to think about how this affects us. Because there are **enormous** spiritual and practical benefits to giving. We give because the church needs money to operate; that is true. But we give also because we *need to give*. We need to let go of the grip that money has on us. This is more true today than it ever has been.

This time we're in right now gives us an unusually pointed opportunity. An opportunity to look at how we feel about money. We are in a very serious economic downturn. The entire country and indeed the whole world is affected. There is a need **now more than ever** to examine the hold that money has on us. Do we own our money, or does it own us? I read in the paper there are people out there who are actually suicidal because they lost much of their portfolio in recent weeks. It is going to be a tough few years. Those of you old enough to remember the Great Depression know even this can be weathered. For those of us younger, these years may well be our own "locust" years, lean and difficult and uncertain.

It's a terrible time to ask you to pledge. We all know this. Just this week I heard about a very large (and affluent) Presbyterian Church that was actually considering cancelling their Stewardship drive this year. The Chairman of the Stewardship program came to the pastor and announced they simply had to cancel. The pastor thought for a moment, and then said, very calmly, "No, we're not cancelling. We have been giving out of our *abundance*. Now we have the opportunity to give of our *substance*."

And no, we're not cancelling, either. Many of you will be tempted not to pledge at all this year, because you're afraid. Many of you will be tempted to decrease your pledge

this year, because your assets are down. Many of you will be tempted to hold on even more tightly to the money God has given you in the face of an uncertain future.

But I don't think you will. I don't think you will, because you know where your treasure is. I don't think you will because you place your faith in God. I don't think you will, because you know for a fact it all belongs to God anyway. And when we give freely of our substance, we can release our worries and live into the freedom that comes only from letting go! We can move into the holy recognition that we are only tenants; we are only camping out for a while.

Rousseau once said, "The years after the locust years are the bumper crop years." These lean times, they will come to an end. There will be better times in the future. I am convinced beyond a doubt when we continue to give generously, even sacrificially during these lean times, God will bless us, and God will bless our church and our ministries beyond anything we can imagine right now. God assures us, we will live safely in the land when we obey God's laws.

Hold all things lightly. Give freely and generously, give even of your substance, and you will be repaid. You will also be undaunted by the headlines. You will discover a deep well of comfort. You will find yourself strangely calm; you will find freedom; you will know joy.

Don't be like me. Don't wait until the house burns down before you figure out where your treasure is.

It's a terrible time to pledge; it is the PERFECT time to pledge.