

## “A Matter of Rejoicing”

Deuteronomy 14:22-29

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Throughout the pages of the Bible, we find the theme of Salvation. This theme appears in the language of wholeness, in the language of healing and health, in the language of overcoming separations from loved ones, in the language of forgiving and being forgiven. In fact, the Bible is full of salvation stories. If it is wholeness you seek, the Bible is your book! The many authors are all concerned with what it takes to move from brokenness toward wholeness, from despair toward joy, from darkness toward light, from chaos toward order.

Salvation has to do with bringing into alignment what we believe with what we practice. I remember well the day I was playing short stop in a youth group softball game. I bent down low to scoop up a grounder, and I couldn't get back up. My spinal column was out of alignment. Dr. Stephen Bing, a chiropractor, realigned all the vertebrae with a series of manual manipulations. After nine visits I had experienced a form of salvation, a blessed realignment of bone and nerve.

I remember the day Lester Starr, the guy at the Cenex gas station, noticed by the uneven tread on my tires that my wheels needed a realignment job. I watched him put the Chevy Vega up on the hoist and jimmy the nuts and bolts and other mechanical devices until the wheels and the axel and the tires were all in alignment. It was a day of wholeness for that car we knew affectionately as 'the Gospel chariot.'

The Bible story that comes instantly to mind is the story of Zacchaeus, the local tax collector. His life and his value system are so far out of alignment that he doesn't know whether he's coming or going. He is out of step; out of sync; out of alignment. He climbs a sycamore tree to catch a glimpse of the one person who might be able to help him move toward salvation, the one person who might be able to help him move toward 'getting it together.' And this is exactly what Jesus does. He points out the basic disconnect in Zacchaeus' life. He is ripping off the very people he is trying to befriend. If he wants to find wholeness, he has to start treating people with respect.

Now this is actually a sermon on stewardship. It's about money. Both Testaments are full of stories about money. It's as if the authors know there is something emotionally charged about money, something powerful, something even spiritual. In the Old Testament we find lots of stories about tithing, bringing to God a percentage of one's harvest. In the New Testament we find stories of widows giving two copper coins, giving everything they have. It's hard to read through any one book of the Bible without stumbling upon a character wrestling with issues of finance.

What the Biblical writers know is that salvation, our basic wholeness of mind and spirit, has something to do with aligning what we believe about money with what we do with our money. The two are often in a state of disconnect. Stewardship education in a church is really salvation education because it has everything to do with empowering individuals and families to bring their theology and their practice into a healthy alignment.

My father-in-law, Gus Kirsch, suffered a major stroke in 1966. It left him paralyzed on one side; it changed his personality; and it meant he would be in and out of hospitals, on and off medicines for the rest of his life.

The medical and prescription bills were off the chart; so much so, that their income tax return caught the attention of the IRS. An auditor came out to the house to see the receipts and the checkbook and all the paperwork. Using a portable adding machine, he totaled up all the columns and all the categories. Referring to what appeared to be a very questionable amount in the charitable giving column, the IRS agent said to Mildred with one of those “I gotcha now’ attitudes, he said to her; your giving claims to be 10 percent of your income!” And without missing a beat, she replied, “Don’t you tithe, Mr. Jones?” And that was the end of the audit.

My in-laws held fast to a belief in a literal tithe. And they practiced that belief until the day they died. They found that illusive joy, that mysterious wholeness that comes with aligning theology and practice. I’d give anything to have them on our stewardship committee, not because they tithed, but because they lived what they believed about money.

This fall, the stewardship committee, through its newsletter articles, written materials soon to be mailed out, and oral testimonials; is inviting all of us to be as healthy as Gus and Mildred; to name what we each believe about the claim God has on our time and on our talent and on our money, and then moving to align our practice with that belief.

So, if you are a person who honestly believes God has no claim whatsoever on your life, your pledge will likely be zero. If you are a person who believes God has a claim on your whole life, you’ll have to get pretty creative with your pledge! If you are like me, you are somewhere in-between the two extremes!

It is not your money the church is after. If it were about the money, I wouldn't be standing here. If it were about the money, I wouldn't be in this vocation. Stewardship is about our wholeness as persons of faith. I want to be a whole person. I want you to be whole, also.

Malawi lies in the Great Rift Valley. Its unique geography and climate make it possible for the baobab tree to thrive there. Do you know the baobab tree? In their local folklore, it is known as the Devil tree. When you look at a baobab tree from top to bottom, you see that it appears to be growing upside down! The branches and twigs appear like a root system. And the trunk seems to get wider toward the top! It's an upside-down tree. It's a quirk of nature. Malawians associate this with the Devil who is said to have his values all discombobulated, all out of alignment. Malawians joke about uprooting the baobab tree and flipping it right-side up. So, this is a salvation story parents love to tell their children. It's about naming what seems to be out of alignment and then making the adjustments as needed.

Having explained stewardship education in this way, I imagine the nominating committee will be getting dozens of phone calls from people wanting to serve in this peculiar aspect of our ministry which seeks to announce the salvation Jesus intends for all people.

When I get my pledge card in the mail this week, I'll be filling it in with an eye to alignment, to the confluence of belief and practice. You do the same. In the greatest of hope....Amen!