

“Hallelujah”
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Morningside Presbyterian Church
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So the people were restrained from bringing; for what they had already brought was more than enough to do all the work. Exodus 36:6b-7

When Walter Huff and I spoke about today’s worship service on Wednesday, we realized that today was going to be a challenging day for everyone up here in the chancel: the choir, the choir director, the chair of the Stewardship committee, the liturgist, and the preacher. The preacher would have to cover three significant subjects: Thanksgiving, music, and money! While I was contemplating how to deal with this humdinger of a Sunday morning, I distracted myself by re-reading an e-mail one of you had recently sent me. It’s about the two fellows who were flying over the south Pacific when their airplane crashed. Eventually they washed up on a tiny, barren island. One of the survivors of the crash began to panic, “Oh my goodness, I know we’re going to die here. I’ve looked all around and there’s no food, water, no shelter!”

The other man calmly shook his head, “I’m not worried. I have a lot of money in my bank account at home.”

“What are you talking about?” the first fellow said. “Money won’t do us a bit of good here!”

“Oh yes it will. It’s Stewardship Season back at our church, and I know my pastor is going to find me no matter where I am!”

The story I just read from Exodus is made of the stuff pastors dreams are made of. After the Israelites had escaped from Egypt and were in the midst of their journey in the wilderness, God had given them the law by which they were to organize their society and be guided in their personal behavior. The tablets, the law of God, needed a place to reside. The Lord instructed that a tabernacle be built. The tabernacle and the tent of meeting in which it would reside were to be set up when the people

camped and then broken down and carried along on the next leg of the journey, as God's people made their way toward the Promise Land. Today's passage drops us right down in the middle of the story, where we overhear Moses speaking to the people about the work of the artisans whose skill, intelligence, and knowledge had been brought to the task of building. In order to complete their work, the artisans needed materials – resources – that the people had with them. Moses ordered the people to bring their offerings so the artisans could finish their work. As time passed, a real problem arose. The people kept on bringing their free will offerings, every morning, every day. They lined up. There were so many gifts that the artisans complained to Moses that the people were bringing more than enough to do the work the Lord needed to be done. Way too much! Too many lamb skins, too many gemstones, too many yards of canvas. Too much, already! Moses issues an executive order: "People of God, you are hereby today restrained from giving any more. No man or woman is to bring a single thing in addition to what has already been brought." I told you this is the stuff pastors' dreams are made of!

One of you recently sent me a bulletin from Morningside's past - February 18, 1951. On the front is a picture of Morningside. It is an odd picture. Everything is here, the buildings, the sanctuary, the trees, the grass. What is missing is the steeple. I understand that it took six years from the time the building was built for the resources to be gathered to put the steeple on top. On the back of the bulletin was the financial report from the Stewardship Committee. The entire annual budget of this congregation was \$38,521. Administration, music, mission, education, everything. (A special offering to send girls to camp was not included in the budget.) I imagine Dr. Arthur Vann Gibson, pastor at the time, would have given a couple of eye teeth to have had Moses' problem. I imagine that every pastor who has ever served this church would have too. Wouldn't it have been grand, Bill Humphries, if we'd had to hire a couple of beefy security guards to stand at the door? "I'm sorry, ma'm. You can't bring that offering in here today."

"But I want to. I want to be a part of what's going on here that glorifies God."

"Sorry lady. Maybe next year. This year, we already have more than enough to do God's work."

It's so important for people to have the opportunity to give to that which is "greater than ourselves." To the Israelites, it was their joy to build a sanctuary that represented the presence of God in their midst. It's a beautiful story, this story in Exodus. The cloud of the Lord hovers over the people and the tabernacle by day. By

night, fire was in the cloud. The people were never without the abiding, guiding, glorious presence of God.

Have you ever heard this story before? Restrain that giver! It usually isn't a problem, but sometimes people do get carried away. The needs overflow, and the generosity to meet those needs overflows as well. I heard this week at our staff meeting from Melinda Sandkam that we have an overflow problem in Room 201 upstairs, children's worship. They are literally out of pews and chairs for children to sit in. I learned also for this year's Christmas pageant (please note, we haven't carved the Thanksgiving turkey yet!) 43 children are signed up to participate. I will tell you if and when excessive giving comes to the crisis point around here, but I can say that in terms of the great things God is doing here, we are at a crisis of abundance.

In the case of Israel, the over-commitment of the people was the result of one simple thing: gratitude to God. God had delivered them from Pharaoh's army. God was guiding them day and night. God was giving them their daily bread. When they had complained and gotten grumpy, God had forgiven them. When they had lost heart, God had remained faithful to them anyway. What do you do when you are so grateful that you can't stand it? You look for ways to express your gratitude.

Some years ago, a Japanese airliner crashed. Among the wreckage were found hastily scribbled wills and notes of farewell. One businessman ended his note to his three sons, "Do not be sad. For the happy life I have lived, I am truly, deeply grateful."

To be thankful is the essence of being human. At the very least it will save you from being whiny and grumpy. At the best, gratitude will save your soul.

Last Sunday, we celebrated our 82nd birthday here at Morningside. I felt as if my own heart would burst with thanksgiving as the choir took us higher and higher. By the time of the benediction response, we were truly at the throne of grace. Then today, our worship began with the mighty, majestic words of the Psalm that is the crescendo of the entire book of the Psalter, the 150th Psalm. "Praise the Lord; Praise the Lord in his sanctuary; Praise him in his mighty firmament." This sanctuary that the Psalmist refers to is not the tent of meeting or any building with walls and ceilings and steeples. This is the heavenly sanctuary, the heavenly temple, and the firmament is nothing less than the vault of heaven, in which the stars and planets are fixed. Look at your Call to Worship. The cosmos is already rejoicing over the mighty deeds and surpassing greatness of God. Mortals are invited to join the chorus that is already in progress.

The last five Psalms in our Psalter begin with the word “Hallelujah” and end with the word “Hallelujah.” We translate it in English, “Praise God.” The Hebrew word is *hallel*, meaning to praise in a sense of joyous, unselfconscious abandon. You praise because you can’t help yourself. You do it for your own sake; you praise in the company of other grateful mortals. There is nothing more natural you can do than to praise God, the creator, sustainer and sovereign of the universe. There is nothing more counter-cultural than to acknowledge that we are not the center of the universe. We, with all our systems and plans and governments and ideas, do not make the world go around. All thanks and praise to God!

The 150th recounts no benefits, asks no favors. It just rolls out adoration: first, the celestial bodies, then the musical instruments are swept up into the mighty music. “All that breathes” joins the chorus. Alleluia! No, I said it wrong. I want to say “Hallelujah!” I like the Hebrew word better than its less robust Latin sister “Alleluia”. “Alleluia” seems too nice. *Mr and Mrs So and So request the honor of your presence at the so and so sing-along...* that’s what Alleluia says. But Hallelujah – Hallelujah goes deep down into your bones, it’s everything, it’s your whole being. Praise the Lord! It’s earthy and gritty and majestic and magnificent.

I recently had to buy an airplane ticket using frequent flyer miles. I hadn’t done that in awhile, so when the agent asked for my password I couldn’t remember. I went through the desk drawer; I knew I had written it on something! I couldn’t find it. Finally she said, “Guess”. I guessed. “Wrong,” she said, then said sternly, “You have one more chance; otherwise you’ll have to bring your driver’s license to the airport.” I guessed again and GOT IT!

“Hallelujah” is our password, our entrance code to a God-centered life. It’s our exit code that releases us from that confusing, closed in kingdom where self-love and self-concern and over-consumption are our lords and masters.

Don’t forget your password to the life that is really life! It’s “Hallelujah”. When everything is falling apart, “Hallelujah”. When the mighty forces of life are overwhelming, when chaos is threatening, praise God, whose love will one day bring everything together in perfect harmony. This is the spiritual reality that under girds the universe itself.

Lewis Thomas, a physician and etymologist, writes, “The need to make music and to listen to it is universally expressed by human beings. I cannot imagine even in our earliest times, the emergence of painters to make cave paintings without there having been, near at hand, equally creative people making song.” (*The Lives of a Cell*)

In the earliest days of our church life in this sanctuary, the yearning to make song manifested itself in the acquisition of the organ, in 1956. Fifty-one years later, we celebrate its restoration and dedicate this wonderful new instrument to the glory of God. It is amazing to note that nothing major in any way, shape or form, has been done to this organ in 50 years. It was about time, don't you think? Thanks to your giving with gusto, Walter Huff no longer has to use bailing wire and chewing gum to keep the music coming. He no longer has to explain to visiting musicians how to prevent the organ from making unexpected burping sounds as brides come down the aisle! All of that is history now, because you could not be restrained in your giving, and because God knows that what keeps us human is singing our Hallelujahs.

They tell me the instrument now is worth about \$1 million, but its real value lies in what it contributes to the spiritual well-being of all who enter here: comfort, inspiration, revelation, encouragement. How can you put a value on such priceless gifts as those? Because we are inspired here to love God, all kinds of things are happening, spilling over, out into our church and into our world. I had an interesting experience this week; I asked a person connected with mission if we could make a contribution to a particular justice ministry that I knew was suffering. I knew we didn't have money, and it wasn't in the budget. I said, "Could we find just \$500?"

The answer came back, "No. We'll give \$1,000."

I'm giving Moses a run for his money here! Thanks be to God for you.

I've had some health issues in recent days. I have learned that if Congregational Care or the Board of Deacons wants you to have a casserole, by golly, you're going to have one! Restrain that giver? You can't do it here! Morningside is determined to make life easier in the name and spirit of Christ, whose giving knew no ending.

I want to close with two words, but it will take me a couple of sentences to get there. They are words that capture for me the spirit that permeates Morningside Church, the spirit that unfailingly acknowledges the human dignity of all, while also remembering that we were created, to use Martin Luther's famous phrase, "to praise and magnify the Lord." This spirit is composed of two usually incompatible elements: brilliance and modesty. You rarely find these characteristics together, but they come together perfectly in Walter Huff. I think of him as the chief usher here, in the sense that week after week he ushers us in to that realm that is beyond all realms and allows us to approach the presence of the Living God right here on earth.

To God be the glory, and to Walter Huff, gratitude that is deeper than words.
Organist, choirmaster, spiritual leader, friend, brother in Christ - we thank you. Our
cup overflows!

And all the people said, "AMEN."