

Stewardship Column

The Joy of “Unpragmatic” Giving

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I was born the week before my father’s graduation from college at the age of 30. My parents, brother and I lived in a small top floor apartment in Dorchester, Boston. A year and another cheap apartment later, my sister arrived. It was a welcome surprise, but money that was tight got tighter. My father worked three jobs to get us through those early years in the late 70’s. Food stamps, clothes from cousins, neighborly sharing, and our church adopting us as their family-in-need for Christmas 1979 helped a lot.

I was recently asking my parents some questions about that time, and somehow we got on the topic of church giving. I recognized to them that being the “good Nazarenes” they were at the time, it must have killed them not to be able to tithe to their church. In response, they both looked at me funny, and my father said this: “Well, it *may* have killed us not to tithe. We wouldn’t know. Because that year I distinctly remember giving *15%* of our income.”

Now, 15% of my father’s income from three low-income jobs back then didn’t amount to much, but 15% of any family’s income when you’re struggling to get by is a lot. And I was flabbergasted to learn that even in our family’s leanest year, my parents tithed. In fact, they tithed *more* than the 10% their church told them they should give.

I’ve sat with this story from my parents for a while now and wondered at why, after it surprised me, a feeling of something like confused pride rushed in. I mean, by all available evidence, most would say that my parents weren’t as fiscally responsible as they could have been.

You could blame conservative church ideology for that. You could say my parents were made to feel they *had* to tithe in order to be good people, but my parents would be insulted by that assertion. And it doesn’t explain why they gave 50% *more* than what their church told them to give nor why they still tithe thirty-five years after joining the UCC.

Without the conservative Church to blame, other questions come to many minds: Why didn't they do *this* or *that* instead with their money? Why didn't they save it and then give more in future years? Why would they give away so much that they couldn't guarantee their family's being able to survive without help? (Ooo, now there's an interesting question that assumes my parents believed in *guarantees* or valued surviving *without help*.)

I didn't ask my parents why they gave so much. I didn't ask them why they gave not just 10%, but 15%. I knew them well enough to figure that out after thousands of stewardship lessons growing up. My parents may be *in* this world, but they've always refused to live *of* this world. For as long as I've known them, they've sought to live as citizens of the Kin-dom of God first, even if it meant giving to a church that then gave back to them in return, even if it meant incurring debt to meet needs or not paying down debt so they could still be generous, even if it meant doing without, having to ask neighbors for help, and not always knowing how the bills would get paid the next month. To them, leading from a place of generosity, belief in community, thanksgiving and reciprocity without exact accounting was what it meant to welcome and make a path for the Divine.

Digging into my confused pride at the details of their story, I think their seemingly unpragmatic example -- and all financial examples that might be deemed by some as unpragmatic -- hold lessons God wishes for us to hear.

Fast forward 43 years to my own life here in Seattle. I have one child, not three. We are a dual income household. I haven't lived paycheck-to-paycheck or had to count my pennies in ten years. I don't have to associate with my neighbors if I don't want to; we don't share cars or childcare, sugar or lawnmowers. Community is by choice, not necessity. I give generously (as I was taught), sacrificing some things in order to give, but I'll be honest: I feel a little less blessed and a little less of a blessing than my "unpragmatic" parents in 1979. I know by all worldly standards, a comparison of my life side-by-side with my parents' life back then would have many people quickly circling mine as the example of the two to follow. And I hate that we don't look more closely to the upside-down ways of God at work in those leading from love (over what society deems practical) and a centering of interdependence over independence.

I still have much to learn from my parents and others' embrace of the world. Maybe we all do.

Thinking about this more broadly, can you imagine what our churches, our conference, our world might look like and make possible were we to recenter interdependence over independence and lead from love before seemingly pragmatic, individual survivalism tactics? It's *so not* the way many churches are oriented, and yet, I feel it in my bones of faith: beauty and joy this way lies. And I believe it begins with practices of stewardship, one commitment at a time shaping our hearts unto a new reality.

May God help us to learn the lessons and blessings of giving at odds with what makes sense to society but brings joy anyway. Toward God's Kin-dom, let us grow.