

Genesis 4:1-8  
Luke 11:37-41  
Acts 20:32-35

## PERMISSION TO GIVE

There is, I believe, a great hunger in all of us to be useful. It is never enough for us simply to pay our bills and have enough left over to buy some toys or pleasures. We long to accomplish something – to leave the world, or at least some small portion of it, a little better for our having been here. The best days we ever have are the days in which we feel like we made a contribution, made a difference for somebody, brought a little peace or beauty or joy to some situation or to some person somewhere.

It is not true that people are greedy by nature. It is learned behavior, usually enhanced by fear. But the truth is, people love to give – if they think it will really help; if they think it is really important; if they think they can manage it without shortchanging other people or responsibilities that they love and care about also. We do not like to be played for suckers. We do not like to be lied to, cheated, hoodwinked – not even if somebody else thinks it's for a good cause. Since such things have happened to most of us for as far back as we can remember, we have learned to be cautious – maybe, at times, even cynical. But the truth is: At heart, we are generous creatures. There is a very deep desire in us to be useful. That was the message of last week's sermon. We want to be useful. If we believe in Jesus Christ, we especially want to be useful to our Lord.

Greed is one of the Seven Deadly Sins. But most greed is an aberration of generosity. Instead of doing what good we can as we go along, greed is a desire to amass enough wealth so we can do a huge amount of good – play benefactor on a grand scale – and get great fame and acclaim for it. Play God, if you will. That is the deadly part of the sin, by the way (the desire to play God). *Satan is the Father of Lies*. Satan whispers that if we can just amass a small fortune, then we will be able to use it so well that lots of people will love and honor us. Most often, greed is just delayed generosity. Only, the delay ends up consuming the generosity.

Anyway, last week was the good news: We all have a deep and abiding desire to be useful. We are generous at heart. Our parents had to train us not to be too generous – had to scold us for giving away too

much. They called it “being responsible,” and indeed it was a necessary lesson. Nevertheless, if you have concluded that most people are stingy and greedy, take a more careful look. If you sometimes scold yourself for being stingy or greedy, perhaps you should look beneath the surface for the real motive. Kicking ourselves for the wrong reasons never helps. It only distracts us from hearing and obeying God.

Last week was the good news. Today is the bad news, at least to some people’s way of thinking. *Thinking* of being good stewards, *thinking* of the precepts of tithing, *thinking* of what the church could be like if all of its members dedicated themselves to being the faith community we are called and invited to be – the body of Christ on earth – well, that’s enough to move many of us toward a great desire to give. Most people in our society think that this is all there is to it. If we *want* to give – if we are persuaded to be generous – end of story. Drama complete. Only, it can never be that way for Christians.

I used to have a short, single-shot .22 rifle. I bought it to teach Willene and Brennan how to shoot. We had a lot of fun with it up on my father’s farm. But then Willene and Brennan grew too tall and switched to other rifles. For a long time, the little one just sat in the corner gathering dust. It struck me one day that it would make a handsome present for my nephew. Fortunately, I called his parents first. As it turned out, they had decided that guns were something they did not want their children to have anything to do with. Oops, close call! It was their right to choose, of course; the gift was not wanted. I was sad for a bit, having grown willing to give the gift. I felt sure my nephew would have loved it.

I doubt if there is anyone here who has not received some gifts along the way that really were not wanted. Some of you are very careful about such things. You keep them in the closet, carefully labeled. You bring them out when their donors come to visit. When the car drives away, back they go into the closet. Not a very good way to build open, honest relationships, but you are just trying not to hurt anyone’s feelings. At least that is one side of it.

Many gifts are given which are not really received. It is one of the sadnesses in life. The more precious the gift, the sadder it is if the gift is not received. Sometimes people give love or a deep and meaningful expression of their inner selves, and the gift is not received. Sometimes there is no help for it; some gifts simply cannot be received. It’s the

wrong time, or we are not ready, or perhaps we simply are not aware enough to realize the value of what is being offered. Jesus came with many gifts, and few people have been willing to receive most of them.

Sad but true, many gifts are given that are not or cannot be truly received. They sit in the corner somewhere, gathering dust. Sometimes the things we do not want are a greater judgment upon us than some of the things we do want. Sometimes we do not want forgiveness or wisdom or justice or some Savior dying on a cross for us. What can we do with such a gift – except change our entire way of life in order to receive it?

Some gifts do no good. They sit in the corner somewhere, gathering dust, waiting for a receiver. A gift without a receiver is a great sadness, a forlorn and lonely thing – one of the great tragedies in life. Sometimes it is like that between us and God. God gives us things we do not really want. And we give God things that God does not really want.

What if we get so focused on what we are willing to give that we forget the far more important questions: What will we be *allowed* to give? What can we get *permission* to give? What is God willing to receive from us?

So here comes Cain, way back in the fourth chapter of Genesis. Abel was a shepherd and Cain was a tiller of the ground – the first farmer. Which is the greater symbol of dominion and progress? Which has the greater promise of moving toward civilization, culture, abundance – greater benefit for more people? Clearly Cain is the brother on the move. Cultivating the land has far more potential than just watching the sheep graze. Indeed, despite his sin, Cain is a go-getter – the first to build a city instead of just being content with the nomadic life. But the thing we are watching this morning – the lesson every Christian learns back in Sunday School (if we are still teaching Bible stories in Sunday School) – is that you cannot bring to God just any old gift you want, whenever you happen to want to. Giving is not just an automatic deal. We who follow Christ are no more in charge of our giving than we are of any other part of our lives. Did we die to the old life, or did we not? Did we turn life over to the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ, or did we not?

About seventy-five percent of Christendom today believes that conversion is about us deciding to be good. Becoming a Christian, many think, means deciding to be loving, generous, kind, forgiving, and nice. A Muslim, a Buddhist, a humanist, or an atheist can decide the same

thing; I suspect that the same percentage of them decide as we do – and do as well at it as we do, too.

Becoming a Christian is recognition of God's love in Christ and your turning your life over to Jesus Christ. It is about us not being in charge anymore. We move from a former life to a New Life under new management. Our good impulses are no longer our own, any more than any other impulse. When you get baptized, does only the bad part go under the water? You think Satan cannot use your generosity just as easily as he uses your greed, if you are not under discipline? Christianity is not about being good – it is about letting Christ into your life. That is an old phrase which means inviting the Holy Spirit into every area, subject, decision, plan, and purpose we ever have. "We are not our own; we were bought with a price."

So Cain and Abel brought their gifts to God. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering – the firstlings from his flock. As his offering, Cain brought some of the produce from the soil. But the Lord "*had no regard for Cain or his offering.*" Cain's anger and jealousy led to the Bible's first murder.

We can only surmise that Cain's gift was tainted with pride, or some other attitude that made it unacceptable. But the principle behind the story is crucial: God is not a beggar. God will not accept just any old gift we decide to give, any old time we decide to give it. With reverence and respect, with prayer and devotion, we seek a right and appropriate way to give to God. It may take years, even a lifetime, before we learn to give in a way that God can accept and bless. To invest in the Kingdom – to lay up treasures in Heaven – is at least as difficult, and requires at least as much time and energy, as laying up treasures on earth. Jesus did not suggest that it was easier – only that it was different and wiser. One of the things we all hope and long to do before we die is to make some gift to God that God can receive and bless. That is never automatic or easy. It must be the right gift, in the right way, at the right time – and appropriate to the giver.

Somehow the church usually gives the impression that God is just tickled to death to get anything at all from us. Maybe that nonsense is perpetrated by us preachers. Or maybe it's because we know our inner tendencies to be cautious and stingy with God, and so we just assume that God would be grateful to get anything at all from us? Never mind ...

Scripture is full of warnings to the contrary. The lamb must be without blemish. Gifts must be the firstfruits – off the top, not the bottom, of our prosperity. All of the notable figures in the Bible were forever having to learn that they could not give their gifts or do their deeds for God just any old time or in any manner they wanted to. They always had to get permission first. The gifts and deeds had to be part of God's plan and design or they could not be blessed – they would come to nothing – or worse, they might even lead to disaster.

Illustrations are endless. I will mention only one. David was Israel's greatest king. David's life was filled with great and daring deeds, and for the most part, he loved God above all else. David had a very special desire – one thing he wanted to accomplish for God more than anything else in the world. He wanted to build a temple in Jerusalem: a place to house the Ark of the Covenant; a center where all Israel could gather to worship. David was the king; he had the means. What could stop him?

David told Nathan the prophet. Nathan thought it was a wonderful idea and gave his blessing immediately. But then they did one more thing, an unheard-of thing – at least unheard-of for many folk today. They checked with God. After all, it was God's temple they wanted to build. As it turned out, God would not give permission. God did not want and would not receive this great gift of love and devotion from David. It was one of the greatest disappointments of David's life.

Some say David's energies were needed too much in other matters. Some say David was not worthy – that his life was too full of violence or that his sins were too great. We do not know why, actually, and it is none of our business. The fact is, David wanted to do this special thing for God, and God would not grant permission. But God *was* consulted. And David was not fool enough to go ahead with a gift if God would not receive it. May we all become people of such wisdom!

All gifts are tainted with the giver. There is no help for that, and that is as it should be. The giver is part of the value of the gift. It is still a great privilege to be allowed to give. To give a gift is to seek influence and involvement. It is a bid to be part of something or someone – to be associated with some purpose or group. But gifts must be received or they can do no good – and they may do great harm.

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We must reverse our understanding of giving. No matter who pleads, how well they plead, or what we may think the need is, it is imperative, if we are the Lord's servants, that we first make sure that what we want to give will be acceptable to God. It is not enough to be willing to give. It is imperative that we also get permission to give.

For the most part, the church will accept anything you may be willing to give. But that is not the question. The question is: Will God accept it – receive it and bless it? That is what makes all the difference. That is the only thing that can make a real difference. It is an ancient principle of our WAY – of the Christian Path: first the prayer, then the deed.