

# 12.1.2024 Sermon

## Worship – The Paradigm of Giving

### **SPEAKERS**

**Rev. Dr. Tracy L. Saletta**

So, you know, I'm going to pause here for a minute. Erica, I'm going to the last song that Brigitte sang, first verse, because I'm going off my sermon.

So, we all just got back from Thanksgiving, right? Some of us have been around family, some of us have not. Some of us have had wonderful times, and some of us were alone.

And I just want to acknowledge that in the room, and I've been thinking about going after the one, leaving the 99 to go after the one. I don't want to disregard those of you in this room who had wonderful weekends. God bless you. I love it. But I also want to acknowledge that there are those in the room who did not, and I'm thinking, I've got to cry a little. I'm thinking of the ones that have been away from family, or the ones who had a difficult time, or the ones who didn't have a Thanksgiving, or the ones who went in and got words spoken over them that were unfair.

And I read this, this is God's Word over you: God made you, and God likes what He made. God does not make mistakes, and God is with you.

And then, in the midst of all of it, God stands before you, and God stands behind you. You are not alone. And in those moments when we do feel alone, and when we're missing people, and when it's difficult, God never leaves us. And I love every song you chose today, Brigitte, because it was a reminder of God's love for us. So, I love Pastor James that you had us put that over our hands, over our hearts, and confess that. Because we just need to pause every once in a while, especially when we're together, and just say, "I am loved. I belong. God loves me so deeply, and I am the one God loves. I'm the one, and I'm the one that God will chase down to tell me so." Amen, amen. Now you can start the clock.

So, we're in a series on the gym. And the idea of the gym that Pastor James brought out, where did I go? Is that, rather than using the analogy of the church being a hospital where you are taken care of (and so often the church has carried this image), right? That you walk into a church, it's a hospital. You're taken care of, the doctors take care of you, nurses take care of you, you get fed, everybody serves you, and as you lay in bed, what the idea of the gym is that our spiritual health is

about taking responsibility for our own maturity, for our own development, and for our own growth.

Maturity and growing up means that we're going to get in our car, we're going to go to the gym, we're going to find a trainer, and we're going to begin to implement, practice, and use the machines or jog around the track or do what we need spiritually to grow up. And I think for a very long time, the church, we in the church, have been about, "I'm going to come in and Pastor Herkimer, you feed me." And so, the shift that we're feeling, and I don't think it's just our church, I actually think it's very global, the shift that I believe is happening in the church at this time is: "Hello church, it is time to grow up. Hello church, it is time to be a light on a hill. It is time to be the beacon that God has invited us to be."

So, we're starting this series, and we started it with praise and worship. Today, we're kind of ending our series around praise and worship. We're moving into Advent, and then from here we're going to move into our next training circuit on prayer. So today is a little bit on Advent, it's a little bit on praise and worship, and it's a little bit around giving, and that's what we're going to talk about. Because Advent is all about giving. That God so loved, that God gave, that God poured out, and that God gave us abundant life. That God gave us His own Son. That God gave us this beautiful earth that is filled with so much beauty, so many secrets, so many wonders, that even in a lifetime we live, we will never fully understand. And they're still discovering new things. That God gave us this miracle called life. Even how our bodies operate is astounding, and is so filled with wonder and mystery, that God poured all of this out on us.

So, I'm going to tell you that today there's going to be a lot of writing. I'm skipping ahead here, but there's going to be a lot of writing, and I'm going to ask you a question in a minute. So underneath your chairs, everybody pull out those cards. Or if you have a journal, pull out the journal. Or if you take notes in your phone, pull out your phone, because I'm going to ask you a lot of questions today.

I am not going to ask you to share them, because this is between you and you. And I'm such a firm believer in writing things down. I'm such a firm believer in taking notes, and I'll tell you why. Because there are so many times that I will go back and I will read something, and I'll be like, "Wow, God, you did this." Or I'll go back and I'll say, "Really, am I still dealing with this five years later?" Anybody else do that too? Yeah, we all do that, don't we?

So, here's my question: When you think of God giving, what has God given you?

When you think of God giving, what has God given you? It can be over your lifetime, it can be over this past year, it can be over this past week, it can be in the last 10 minutes. What has God given you?

And if you need a pen, just raise your hand. Tony's not here. Oh, there he is. Oh, he's already doing it. He's a master at what he does. I'm not biased, and he's handsome, also. Visitors, that's my husband.

I'm going to pause you now, and I'm going to have you just briefly keep writing that later, and keep your cards, because we're going to write more or in your phone, or however you're doing it.

But to top off what God has given us is, of course, God gave us His own Son, and that's what this season is all about. That Son willingly came to give of Himself, and that's what this season is all about, from the very beginning. And Revelation tells us that Christ was crucified from the beginning, from the beginning of time, Christ knew why He came to this earth.

And when I think of this season, and I think of who God is, and when I think of Jesus and I think of creation, and when I think about how creation works with seeds and with planting, and with those seeds that are planted, and how things grow from what's planted, and how God created creation to operate like that. When I think about the season, and I think about giving, and how much God is a giver, and how much God is an abundant giver, and how God holds nothing back from us.

And when I was thinking about praise and worship, and closing out this series on praise and worship, what I wanted to do was close out with, and it just miraculously landed on the first day of Advent, the first Sunday of Advent. But I want to talk about giving as worship.

And I have to say this, there are some disclaimers. First, Tony locked the doors. No, I'm just kidding.

Second, I wore my cross in case anyone rushes me, and I had to hold it up. And I'm just kidding for that too, but I do have to give disclaimers. I was at an event this week, and for half an hour I watched somebody at this Christian event manipulate the heck out of the audience using Bible verses, using God's love, obedience, every tactic known to Christianity to get an audience to give.

And I wanted to throw up, and I was so aggravated, and I almost wanted to leave. I was like, "I'm done." And as I'm sitting there, I'm like, am I even a Christian? Because I hate this. It was so frustrating to me. That is not what this is about. This is not about manipulation. This is not about getting people to give more. This is not about stirring up an audience. This is not about, you know, some sort of manipulation.

This is about a concept and a principle and something that has been stolen out of the church because of damage that has been done within the church around giving.

And damage that has been done within the church around conversations about giving. And so, what has happened as a pastor, and I've been a pastor here for 27 years and elsewhere I've pastored, so it's been about 38 years in ministry of one way or another. What has happened is that the conversation around giving has been stolen, and so as a pastor, you're not able to enter into these conversations even in a theological way, because people go, "I'm done. I'm out of here. I don't want to hear it," because it's been stolen.

So how we hear what I'm talking about today is interesting. And even when I said the words "giving," you all had bam, you all thought of something. You all had a story. You all had a paradigm. You all had an idea. You all had a horror story, or you had a good story. If you came from a background where there was a lot of manipulation, that story popped into your mind, and you thought of that.

And I was thinking, as I was preparing for this, Richard Rohr, my favorite guy, and one of my favorite quotes, he says, "Most people don't see things the way they are. Most of us see things through the way we are."

So, even as I'm talking right now, you're hearing me through your own lens. Even as I'm speaking, you're hearing me through your story and through the story that you've lived with in regards to giving to the church.

So, I could be walking, like floating on air, saying phenomenal things, and if you've had a terrible experience, you're going to hear, you're not going to like what I'm going to say.

So, I'm just bringing all of that into the room, the elephant. I'm riding the elephant right now, so that we're all on the same page, and I know that that's what's happening in the room right now.

So, it's not really what we see or what I'm saying that affects us. It's how we're all hearing, and how we interpret what we're seeing and hearing that really is affecting us, that really makes the difference, and it's how it's going to get sifted in our brains. It's how we're going to think about it, it's how we're perceiving the situation, and it's what we do with those perceptions. And I want to give two more quotes, because I want to bring this home,

because, as we're having this conversation, there is a principle of giving in the Bible. It's a true principle. There is a principle of worship and giving as worship that is a bona fide principle within the Bible that I think is important and that I think rounds out a Christian life. But I don't think it should be filled with manipulation. I don't think it should be filled with coercion, I don't think it should be filled with throwing Bible verses at you. It was so good that I was at this event and heard this guy, because I was so appalled. And then how ironic that I'm going to preach on this on Sunday. And so, it was almost my it was my boundaries, right? Because I was like, okay, not

like, if I could have filmed him and showed it like, I would have been like, not that. But that's what the church has done,

was that you know, gotta you know. And it was even as bad as when you get to heaven

and God thanks you. And I'm like, talk about swearing Pastor James.

I think it might have been coming out of my mouth, just a little, yeah, it was, it was frustrating. But I want to give these two quotes, and I just read these, and it was in this book, *Worry No More*, and it's about worry, but really, it's about thinking. And it says this: worry (in parentheses, are thinking). Hear this if you can grab this in your life. This is very powerful.

Worry is a movie that you're creating. You're creating this in your mind, complete with detailed settings and talented actors who perform their part perfectly and convey all the emotions. The movie director, who is you and me and all of us, has told them to use.

You are the author of everything that happens in your imagination. You might not think so in times of significant stress, but you are always in control of your story.

If you do not like the story, you are capable of writing a different one. This is what I coach on. I'm a mental health coach. This is what I coach on every single day

when I am telling people, your thoughts are just your thoughts, your feelings are just your feelings, and you can change them.

Yes, you need to acknowledge what you're thinking. Yes, you need to acknowledge what you're feeling, but you have the power to change what you're thinking and what you're feeling, and you have the power to respond the way that you want to respond. And as a matter of fact, oftentimes I will say, "This is the story I'm telling myself," so that I remind myself that this is the story that is going on in my brain that I'm telling myself, or I'll say to myself, "The thought that I'm thinking is..." The feeling that I'm feeling is because it's more like I'm stepping back and observing.

This is what I'm thinking, this is what I'm feeling. And it's important because I'm thinking and I'm feeling it, and I need to care, but it doesn't mean I have to respond to it. I can look at it, and I can make a choice.

So even as we're sitting here in this moment listening to this sermon on giving, do you see how much intro I had to do on this sermon?

Are y'all with me?

Because it's on giving. So even as we're all sitting here, we just need to recognize what we're feeling. So, take a minute, feel what you're feeling. What am I feeling about what's going on in the room right now?

What am I thinking? You just tune in a little bit and go, "Okay, I see, I see what's going on." Okay, and then we continue on.

So, let me go on. So, what I want to ask you in this moment is, what's your thought about giving? What's your story?

What's your feeling? So, I'm going to ask you to, on your card,

What do you believe about giving to the church?

What is coming up for you in this moment, as I'm talking about giving, and I haven't even gotten there yet, what is coming up for you?

What do you believe about giving to the church in general?

Second question, what do you believe about giving to this church?

And I'm not going to ask you to say it out loud,

this is between you and you.

And by the way, this is about your own personal curiosity and discovery for yourself. This is about you knowing your own self.

There are no answers that I'm giving you today. By the way, this is discovery today for you. Applause.

So, I'll let you keep going on that one.

So, I'm going to tell you some of my own personal paradigms, because I think it's important that you know where I stand and when I'm telling you this. I want you to know that this sermon is not about guilt. It's not about, as I already said, whether you give to this church or not.

This is about a theological concept that I believe in and that I think is important as a part of worship and as a part of praise and worship, and I felt that we would be remiss if we did not bring this in as one final concept of praise and worship.

So, some paradigms that Tony and I have

that we believe that this is part of our worship as a family,

and that it is part of our value system that we have as a family, and it is part of our theology, and it is a deep part of my own personal theology that even if Tony did not give, I still would.

And when Tony and I first started giving 41 years ago, and you also need to know we have been giving for 41 years,

when we started, and I'll explain that in a minute,

when we started, I wanted to be.

Begin to give, and Tony did not. This was 41 years ago when we first got married, and the reason that I wanted to give was because, well, I had been a part of a church before Tony was, and I wanted to start giving because it was the right thing to do, and because God was going to get me if I didn't. Law, right? And I'll go into that in a minute.

And so, Tony was a little more hesitant, and he was like, I don't really want to do that. And so, I was like, "Okay, I'll tell you what.

How about if we start giving, and I'll give my salary. And if something ever comes up that, like, we don't have enough, or, you know, doesn't work out, or something like that, we'll stop." And he was like, "Okay, deal."

We never stopped. We kept giving, and just God has been faithful for 41 years. So, have there been times that it's been lean? Yes, we have navigated, negotiated, because it's a value system, which I'm going to get into, because it is a theological belief that he and I both hold that even in times when we have been broke and when we have been in want, we have continued to give,

and we have done our best to continue to pour out and to give. I'm sure there have been times in 41 years that we've skipped,

I don't remember, but on the whole, we have done our best to continue to give.

It is part of my belief in the perichoresis of God that you understand, you know that I always talk about that dance with God, and I so believe it is part about being in a community, that dance that I talk about, that interdependent, mutual, submitted, trusting relationship that we have with God, that I also believe is a part of the communal dance that we have with one another. So that's just part of it. And so, the giving is a part of that, along with serving, along with pastoring, along with everything else I do, it is just part of that dance. It is part of serving God. It is part of living for Christ. It's just part of it. It's not an extra, it's part of what it means for us to follow Christ, and it is also part of what it means to support a place that I believe is making an impact in the community and that is making an impact in the world.

So, when we first started giving, as I said earlier, we first made that commitment as law

that if we don't give, God is going to get mad at us. And that was based on Malachi 3 that I'm sure we've all heard. "Will a man rob God?" I can't even say it without sounding like that,

yet you rob me, but you ask, how do we rob you? In tithes and offerings, and you are under a curse, the whole nation of you. So, I was very afraid that if we ever stopped giving, that we would be under a curse. And so, in the beginning, it was law. But you know, there is a truth. There's a part of life that you have to start out doing things, because you have to do things to almost get the discipline as a child, right? As children, we learned right from wrong. We have to do things by law, to learn to do things until we mature and until grace comes in. And so, from law, we learned grace. But before this, I think it's important to know that tithing is a concept in the Old Testament. There was the Levite tithe, the festival tithe, the tithe to support the poor, the orphans and the widow. And what's interesting is the tithe in the Old Testament was not just 10%. It was actually 23 and a third percent and up to 30%

it was actually way more than 10, and on the years that they would do the tithe to support the poor, the widows, and the orphans, is when it was 30%

and it was not an option for the people of Israel.

But when we move into the New Testament, it becomes.

Are filled with grace, and it becomes something different. And I think Second Corinthians 9 is where it shifts. And Paul writes, remember this, whoever sows sparingly, reaps sparingly. Whoever sows generously, reaps generously. Here's the key, each one should give what they have decided. They are able, no they've decided in their heart, and he is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things, at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. And each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. So, it shifted for me from law. This is what happens to you. If you don't give, you're under a curse to grace. God loves a cheerful giver.

And the grace of God loving a cheerful giver, there's a difference of having somebody do something because they have to do it for you, as compared to somebody doing something because they love you.

And so, when somebody says, "Here, God, here, this is for you," that's God loving a cheerful giver. That, to me, is that perichoretic dance, that exchange back and forth. And it is a, it is a loving gift, back and forth. And I think that there is an important concept of grace here.



So, I do think that so often,

whether we give or not, it's built around scarcity and abundance.

I think sometimes it's built around fear.

I think sometimes it's built around control or trust, or "I've worked hard for what's mine." There could be a myriad of reasons that we do or we don't, or just not understanding that it's part of our relationship. It's part of our praise and worship with God, or it could be because of this

Erica that came up in my feed, like it knew it was, like it knew I was doing this sermon. It's so funny.

It swore for me.

But Franklin Covey, I don't even need to comment on that. That just says enough.

Franklin Covey says that there's a huge difference between an abundance mindset and a scarcity mindset. The path that your life takes depends in part on the mindset that you adopt. You can choose to either view the world as abundant or scarce, but they cannot coexist. The abundant mindset flows out of a deep inner sense of personal worth and security. It's a paradigm that is grounded in the belief that there is more than enough for everyone.

Alternatively, a scarcity mindset is the belief that there will never be enough, resulting in feelings of stress, fear, and anxiety.

So, we all know that there are plenty of verses on giving, and I just grabbed, I literally grabbed the ones that I remembered.

1st Timothy 6:10 says, "The love of money can be a root of all kinds of evil," not all evil, but just a root. "Where your treasure is, there your heart is." "You reap what you sow." "Whoever loves money never has enough." "Keep your lives free from the love of money." "If you want to be perfect, go sell your possessions." "No one can serve two masters." "You can't serve God and money."

Giving is definitely a biblical principle. But something has shifted in the church.

In September 2024, the Christian Post reported that the proportion of giving to a church fell from 74% to 61%. And those who gave to a non-profit or ministry outside of the church fell from 58% to 50%. The proportion who supported neither one rose from 19% to 31%.

And the average evangelical donor, here's what was so interesting to me, donates 2.8% of their household income to churches, down from 3.2% in 2021.

So even in the church, if we were going to use 10% as a base, which again, Tony and I use 10% as our base for 41 years, that's our base.

The average evangelical donor donates 3.2%. Why?

I'm so curious as to why.

Why? Like when I start to look at numbers like that, I'm just curious. Why is that? Is it that we're afraid? Is it that we don't believe that we're supposed to? Is it that we think things have changed? Stress of life? Money doesn't go as far, inflation, groceries, life...

It just makes me curious as to why. And it makes me think of what our mindsets are around money.

And when I started to think about this, I started to back up into it. Because, again, as a coach, I coach a lot on values.

Values are those personally chosen life directions.

And so, a lot of times when I'm coaching people, I have to back them all the way up to... you know, they're like, "Should I stay with this person? Should I not? Should I do this? Should I not? How do I do this? How do I do that?" And I go, "Let's back all the way up to values, those personally chosen life directions. We all have those. We just don't often speak them out."

So, I'm going to have you pull your papers out again.

What is your mindset around giving?

So, let me say this before you start writing.

A value is a person's North Star.

A value provides direction in how you show up and how you live out your purpose.

A value is what is important to you, your authentic self.

So, when your values are in alignment with the way you're living, you experience more joy, more energy, more motivation, more meaning, more fulfillment.

Here's the kicker. I love this sentence, and this is from my coaching: "Values dignify the normal pain that comes with living and provide motivation even when things are hard."

So, giving for Tony and me is very important.

Giving to this community for Tony and me is very important.

So that's a value. So, when life got tough or our month was longer than our money, we would give anyway, because our value gave us an anchor to hold on to when things got tough.

We held on to that value. So, it's important that you know your values when it comes to giving. And I'm purposely pushing you this morning. Welcome to the gym. I am your coach.

I am your trainer, and I'm pushing you on purpose. I wouldn't be a good pastor if I didn't push you every once in a while.

Sometimes you hate your trainer.

Gonna hold up my cross...

Exactly. Dawn just said, "Take her whistle away."

So, I'm going to ask you: What are your values around giving?

Now, these are personally chosen. You may write on your little card, "I do not believe in giving to the church at all." Good! You know your value. "I believe in giving 2%." Great! You know your value. But know your values.

Now, let me say this about values. Also, values can be around everything, right?

Citizenship, friendship, relationship, community... I mean anything. The sky is the limit. Today, we're talking about values around this. And when I was thinking about, again, Tony and I, when I shared with you why we give, those are our values. That's what we hold on to as a family.

So, what are your values? What are your chosen life directions when it comes to giving?

So, I'm going to let you think about that for a minute.

And then I'm going to ask you one more question, and then Pastor James is going to come up for communion.

And the question is this:

What, if anything...

What, if anything, do you feel might need to change?

Might be nothing. Might be something.

You might feel something stirring where you go, "I don't know. I feel like I need this."

What, if anything, might need to change?

You didn't know you were coming to class today, did you?

So, I want to invite you...

No one ran out. That's really good.

Everybody okay?

Y'all still love me?

All right.

But I want to invite you to keep wrestling with this. Keep thinking, keep wrestling.

Keep letting it percolate. And again, you know when I said at the beginning, I don't have answers today, this is your journey. This is your curiosity to think about and to be curious about and to ask yourself questions.

And to take the journey.