

# “Aligning Our Hearts Thoughtfully” (Aligning Our Hearts 1 of 4)

a sermon based on

Philippians 2:1-13 Matthew 21:23-32

and delivered on-  
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17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)

at  
Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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Today, we're beginning a new sermon series: "Aligning Our Hearts." The theme came from a discussion with our Lay Leader and Chair of Finance Committee about what sort of stewardship campaign we could or should do this year, considering the practical matter of limited in-person worship and availability of people to gather to share their stories. In that discussion, Scott mentioned that he'd just read a devotion called "The Four Heart Attitudes for Giving." I looked it up, it's just a simple but profound devotion put out by Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in California.

Basically, his devotion consists of four attitudes to which he dedicates only a couple of sentences: To give thoughtfully (rather than impulsively), to give enthusiastically (rather than begrudgingly), to give voluntarily (rather than compulsory), and to give cheerfully with joy.<sup>1</sup>

Sometime within the next couple of weeks, a letter will be going out talking about these themes and asking you to return an estimate of giving card so that our church leaders on the Finance Committee and Church Council can plan how best to direct our resources for effective ministry in the upcoming year.

When I thought about these four heart attitudes, it just seemed like they really are attitudes that go beyond how we give. How we give or what we give is but one expression of our faith and how we love God. (I mean that as the active word: *love*, not as the emotion as in how we express and grow in love with God.)

One of the things that sets human beings apart from every other creature is that God imparted upon us an intellect with the capacity for reason. This capacity for reason – this huge frontal cortex – frees us from the instinctive impulses of our amygdala. Whereas other animals react immediately to stimulus as either a food, threat, or opportunity to reproduce, we have the capacity to consider future consequences and possibilities and to adjust our behavior accordingly.

However, we are still creatures. Often that thought process gets bogged down in thinking of satisfying our physical impulses. When you think about it accumulating wealth is really about assuring food and shelter for the future, it provides a means of power to overcome threats, and whenever we see an old- rich guy with a beautiful young bride, it's evident that even extends that opportunity to reproduce. Right? I'm just using that as one example. Maybe you can think of others: some even better.

Actually, the world works on that model. Marketers thrive on convincing us what we need to be secure in our base needs. We do need each of those things: as individuals and as a species. In Mathew 26:31-32, Jesus says:

"Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things."

Then he goes on in verse 33:

"But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.crosswalk.com/devotionals/daily-hope-with-rick-warren/four-heart-attitudes-for-giving-daily-hope-with-rick-warren-july-29-2018.html> (Accessed September 14, 2020)

This is where aligning our hearts factors in to the equation. To give thoughtfully – live our faith thoughtfully means to ponder why?

I think Paul gives us a clue in that passage from Philippians which we heard a few moments ago, when he says:

“(B)e of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...” (Pp 2:2b-5 NRSV)

Part of this goes all the way back to the beginning in Genesis 1:28 where we hear that:

“God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’”

In the next verse we hear God giving every plant with its seed to human beings for food.

When our hearts are aligned with God, we get it. When the same mind lives in us that lived in Jesus, we get it. We’ve been made in God’s image (that’s the verse immediately prior to this) – we’ve been made in the image of the one who created all things and are invited to share in the care, nurture, and continuing development of creation. The psalmist’s song:

“The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it;  
for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers,” (Ps 24:1-2 NRSV)

Reminds us that even what we possess belongs to God. Ponder that.

So the question becomes, how do we live out that purpose to care for creation, and especially one another as joint partners and heirs to God’s promise. It’s easy to look for rules in the Bible or in the Tradition of the Church. The Bible and the Tradition of the Church are good places to look for guidance. They are God’s gift to us; but only when we approach them in conversation.

Whether one dismisses what we read and hear as old-fashioned or out of date, or whether one refuses to consider the nuance of ancient context as it relates to ours, there can be a tendency to impulsively becoming legalistic or rejecting God’s instructions for our well-being. I’ll admit that I have that same struggle at times.

I know that it can sound legalistic when preachers talk about tithing: about presenting the first ten percent of one’s income to the church’s ministry. I get that. I also get that it seems hard. It triggers the amygdala’s fight or flight response as a threat to my ability to amass what I need for food and shelter, to stave off threats from the world, and to be able to confidently reproduce. {aside: Just going back to that base creaturely nature.}. I get that. So the impulsive response is either to begrudgingly accede to a demand: which deprives me of any enthusiasm, sense of volition, or cheerfulness; or it’s to rebel and say, “Not gonna do it,” and then maybe complain about what isn’t getting done.

What does thoughtfulness in faith look like when our hearts are aligned with God? What does thoughtfulness in giving look like when we have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus?

When we’re thoughtful we say to ourselves: I’m going to spend time in prayer, because love grows in conversation. When we’re thoughtful we say to ourselves: I’m going to take time to go to worship because just like date-night with my wife it’s my opportunity to intentionally set

some time to be in the presence of the God who so loved me that he sent his only Son to die so that I can have life. When we're thoughtful we say to ourselves: I'm going to accept this invitation to serve in my community and especially through the church because it allows me to live out my purpose to care for all of creation and to establish hope for those who don't fully know the wonders of God love.

When we're thoughtful we say to ourselves: I give to the church because it provides an opportunity to grow hope and extend God's love. Sometimes it's easy to dismiss that part of giving because there are so many other opportunities to give for good. We forget that so many of those other opportunities only exist because someone was motivated by their love for God and humanity to begin it in the first place.

Several years ago, I had an active and generous parishioner say to me that he didn't give to the church because he directed all of his charitable giving into a particular mission project of the church – a mission for which he would donate two or more weeks a year to serve. It was and is a good cause. But I asked, "Where did you get the desire to serve that mission? Didn't it come from the love of God instilled in you growing up in this church? Didn't the idea for that very mission spring out of that Sunday School class taught by your late mother? It's a good mission, but how will it be sustained if we're not continuing to nurture the love of God within this community to see it's value?"

That's why I give. That's why I tithe before I pay anything else. I have it set up that three days after payday, my bank mails a check to the church. Now that I have direct deposit, I don't know that I need the three days for a paycheck to clear, but they do some wonky things when the mail out date falls on a Sunday or holiday.

Years ago, however, I didn't know the joy of giving. I felt guilty for not giving more – for not being able to give more (so I thought.) I wanted to tithe because I knew that was the biblical example, but I was also a bit legalistic. I felt like filling out a pledge card was like signing a promissory note that obligated me to that which I either didn't want to be obligated or feared I couldn't manage.

Then I met Rev. Joe Buckles. He was the pastor of Plainfield United Methodist Church when I transferred my membership there after moving into that community. During the new member orientation, he talked about tithing, and he acknowledged something I'd never heard a preacher say before. He said, suddenly giving ten percent is hard. Most people just can't do it. Then he offered a challenge that freed me from a sense of obligation to deprive myself and from my despair at feeling inadequate. His advice was this: if you want to grow into tithing (and he told us that he actually knew someone who'd followed this principle to 20%) begin by looking at where you are in your giving as a percentage of your income, then increase that percentage by 1% a year. In no more than ten years, you'll be tithing and it will come easily.

The thoughtfulness was a plan. That plan gave me a sense of joy in what I was giving. It excited me about the possibility of being a vital part of my church. It inspired me to find ways to give to the church in other ways, as well. Within two years, I went from giving less than 1% to tithing and actually being more financially secure. Why?

After Rev. Buckles died, my next pastor, Rev. Mary Gay McKinney, helped me to make a little more sense of the reason that giving to the church makes sense. God doesn't need our money, but we need to give. At the time, Mastercard was running those commercials in which

they'd show the price of various things, and then in the end come up with the value of an experience as priceless. "For everything else there's Mastercard." She pointed out that what the world was telling us is that we shouldn't be restricted to our income but that we could and should live at 110% of what we have. What they get is control, because now I'm a slave to my bills. Instead God asks that we cede control to a percentage – in the case of a tithe 10% - challenging us to think about how we really use that which he's entrusted to us.

When we align our hearts with God – when we are thoughtful and have the same mind in us that was in Christ Jesus, we see that it's not by merely saying that we want to do what God tells us that bears fruit (as was the case in Jesus' example in our Gospel lesson today) but that in acting in ways that help to build hope.

In the church that happens by providing a place for us to gather and encourage one another in the presence of God. In the church that happens by sharing together in ministries that build up bodies, mind, and spirits in our community and around the world. In the church that happens, by proclaiming the good news that God loves each and every person.

It doesn't just happen. God invited us to participate with him in the ongoing care and development of creation. Claiming that invitation has to be intentional, it's not forced upon us. To that end when we align our hearts with him pondering how it is we can share what has been entrusted to each of us, we discover a new joy in and zeal for life in the world. AMEN.