

**Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer**  
**October 19, 2008**  
**[www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org](http://www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org)**

**The Power of an Idea**  
**Exodus 32: 30-32**

Our existence is not accidental. This is our Holy Bible's first assertion. In the beginning God created. God chose to create. The holy Word that was present before creation brought into being a universe so vast that we measure it in the incomprehensible standard of trillions of light years, a universe so subtle that it countenances the symmetry of a blade of grass, the velvet of a flower petal, and the invisible but majestic interplay of subatomic particles. To crown creation, God brought into being human creatures capable of receiving and enjoying the divine spirit and responding with spiritual expressions of our own. All of these actions of the creative God are meant to express the power of an idea.

What is this idea?

It is the idea that God in God's own being is a giver. God's heart beats with a desire to give out of the divine self. If we would worship this God, we can do so only by giving ourselves back to the One who gifted us with life. The act of giving reveals the true pathway with communion with God. Moreover, if we would develop relationships with others, we can only do so to the degree that we are willing to give ourselves to others, to invest in their lives. Understanding the very nature of God, understanding the very nature of ourselves, understanding the very nature of our relationships with others is unlocked by the key of this one powerful idea, the idea of giving that characterizes the universe.

This idea of giving is not one idea among many in our faith.

It is *the* idea of our faith, the idea rooted in the heart of God, revealing God's love. It is *the* idea that runs from the first word of Genesis to the last image of Revelation. It is *the* idea present in the Hebrew community that wandered around the wilderness, and *the* idea that characterized the New Testament church. It is *the* idea that strengthened the prophets and empowered the parables. It is *the* idea that calls us to understand that we can only appreciate the God of the universe and the world that this God has called into being by giving out of the depths of our selves in response. The only way to find fulfillment is to give of yourself – this is how God fashioned the world.

All of this sounds rather lofty and vaguely pleasant. The idea of giving sounds so beautiful. Yet to give of one's self is costly. To care is expensive. To love is to render one's self vulnerable. However, God accepts the expense of caring. God embraces the cost of giving. We see this most dramatically in the perfect expression of the divine nature, the person of Jesus Christ, whom we find betrayed in the garden, tortured by soldiers, nailed to a cross unto death as a way of saying that God accepts and embraces and takes into God's own being the cost of giving and caring and loving in our dangerous world. When Paul is trying to explain the nature of Christ's mission, he says,

“Jesus Christ, who though he was in the form of God, did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped. He took the form of a human being, and being bound in human form poured himself out, taking the form of a servant, humbling himself unto God, even unto death, even death on the cross.”  
And how should we respond to this giving nature of God as disclosed in Christ Jesus?  
Paul says, “May the mind that is in Christ be in you also! Have this mind of Christ in you as well!”

We consider the example of Moses in this small but searing passage, our text for the day.  
Moses has surrendered his life absolutely unto God and to his people.  
He has left the quiet life of an obscure shepherd to serve as God’s great agent of redemption.  
He has endured great challenge and conflict in order to effect the liberation of his people.  
He has led them out of bondage in Egypt into the wilderness, accepting its ceaseless travail.  
He has served God and his people as a judge, general, prophet and lawgiver.  
But even as he ascends the mountain to receive God’s Ten Commandments, his people are down below in the process of breaking those commandments.  
When Moses returns to discover their behavior, he is so angry that he breaks the Word of God.  
But he loves them too much to give up on them!  
He turns around and goes back up the mountain to intercede for them.  
He prays unto God, “Lord, if you can find it in your heart to forgive my people” – and then he stops.  
In one of the Bible’s most fascinating verses, Moses stops in mid-sentence.  
He knows his request of God is too impious to utter, and so he stops. He starts over.  
He says instead. “I know my people have acted stupidly. I know they have done wrong. I know they deserve death. But if you are going to kill them, kill me, too. If you are going to end their story, end mine, too.”  
Long before our Lord articulated the truth,  
“Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends,”  
Moses already understood the nature of God’s giving, already understood the nature of love.  
“I know my people deserve judgment, but I love them too much to give up on them.  
Let me suffer whatever judgment that you intend to visit upon them.”

When our Lord is trying to explain the nature of the Christian Gospel, he asks,  
“What does it profit a man to gain the whole world if he loses his soul?  
Yet those who spend their lives trying to save their lives will lose them.”  
It is only in giving away your life, your time, your talent, your resources unto others that you will find your purpose.  
If you want to find fulfillment, says our Lord, you must give yourself away.  
If you want to find fulfillment and contentment, you must pour yourself out.  
But if you try to save your life, you will lose it.  
Our Lord is not stating another religious doctrine that requires us to strain to accept it.  
Our Lord is stating a law of the universe that is as real as the law of gravity.  
If I drop this Bible, it will fall at 9.8 meters per second per second.  
Likewise, Jesus says, if you try to save your life you will lose it, for that is how the universe is made.  
*Only* in giving your life away will you find it.  
This is a law of the universe as real and uncompromising as gravity.

I think of an old woman of my acquaintance years ago. She was crabby and ill-tempered. She was also a hypochondriac. She seemed to develop any disease she saw featured on television. (It’s a good thing she never saw the TV show *House*, or she would have been truly confused!) Any time you visited her, she communicated the impression that she did not have long to live.

Moreover, she gave the impression that she did not have much to live for. The two ideas were intertwined. So her younger sister took pity on her, sold her home, and moved in with her sister, planning to take care of her. But shortly after this move was effected, the younger sister suffered a stroke, which enfeebled her. The situation seemed disastrous. But then a sort of miracle occurred. The crabby lady suddenly perked up. She started nursing her sister, cooking for her, taking her to the doctor, looking after her. She suddenly realized, "I am the caregiver." She was bustling about the house, seeming as if a bolt of "health lightning" had hit her. Her attitude was 180 degrees different. Why? She had someone to whom she could give her life. She had tapped into the idea of the power of giving. The idea of the power of giving changed her world.

I often recall a World War II story I read years ago, an incident recorded by a wartime journalist. A young woman with her baby had escaped Europe to the Spanish-Portuguese border, trying to slip into Portugal so she could catch a boat to America and freedom. She had no papers. She had no money. She was Jewish. It seemed evident that soon she would be discovered and shipped back to a concentration camp and certain death. But she was directed to the door of an old man who explained to her that he was a guide. "Show up at my house tomorrow evening about ten and I will lead you across the border." The woman did as she was told, and she found ten other people milling around the old man's house. All of them were dependent upon this one man for passageway to freedom. He led them along an arduous trek through heavy woods and up a mountain trail. During this long journey, the young woman tired and the baby began to whimper. The guide realized that the safety of the entire party was endangered. Worse, an older man was lagging in the rear, saying to the guide, "I cannot go farther. I cannot keep up. Leave me." Then the guide said a strange thing to the mother, "Give that man your baby." The mother obeyed the guide's instructions, handing the infant over to this weak old man. The guide said to the faltering old man, "You are now responsible for the child." They continued on their way through the rugged pass another half hour, another hour. Another old man began to fall by the wayside, and the guide turned to the old man who had been carrying the child and said to him, "Give him the infant now. Now he's responsible for the child." The transfer was effected. They continued on until one more old man began to falter; then they gave him the infant to carry. By sunrise, everyone, including the infant and the three faltering old men, had made their way to safety. It's a wonderful story, but I think what keeps that story in my mind is the journalist's title. She called it, "The Secret of Life." The secret of life! The secret of life is that we find our power and purpose by embracing the responsibility of giving of ourselves. The power of the idea of giving is the secret of life!

We come to this topic called, "stewardship," which comes with all kinds of trip wires attached to it. We think the word really means that the preacher wants us to give a little more money to the church. That would certainly be fine. But that is not what the word is about. Stewardship's meaning is contained within the word. We are called to be stewards. Stewardship poses a question to us: "What kind of steward are you of what God has given you?" Your life, your time, your talents, your resources, your money – none of them are yours. They have been loaned to you by God. You have been called to be a steward of them. Stewardship asks, "What kind of steward are you being of what you have been given?" The Scriptures say that God loves a cheerful giver.

That is not a comment upon a single action. That is a comment upon a state of being.  
When we say of someone, "He or she is a giving person,"  
we are not talking about a single act,  
we are talking about an entire perspective of life.  
A cheerful giver is someone who realizes that that their entire life is to be an act of stewardship.  
The poet Goethe once observed, "What you do not use becomes a heavy burden."  
What kind of steward are you of God's blessings?  
Everything you have been given has been given to you that you might give it away to someone else.  
To give away what you have been given is how you establish relationships,  
how you understand yourself, how you understand God.  
I can never forget hearing the response of a wounded Vietnam vet who was asked by a reporter,  
"How do you feel about losing your leg in the service of your country?"  
The young soldier replied, "I did not lose it. I gave it."  
That young man understood his life's role as a steward and felt privileged to give  
what he had been given in behalf of what he loved.

"Stewardship."

We think of it as a number we write down on the pledge card that we bring to the church next week.  
In truth, it is a question that involves the totality of our being.  
Stewardship makes us realize that we are privileged to bear each other's burdens.  
To give of ourselves to each other is to partake of the secret of life.  
Stewardship really asks us, "Are you willing to surrender unto God the whole of your being?"  
Two lovers stood at this altar last night and pledged to honor each other, to comfort each other,  
to pour themselves out for each other for better or worse, for richer or for poorer,  
in sickness and in health, until death parts them -- that's stewardship!  
A football player this week had his little finger amputated so he could continue to play with his teammates.  
He explained, "I told the guys a few weeks ago that I loved them so much I'd take a bullet  
for them. Here was the chance to back up my words." That's stewardship!  
Here is a young man who understands the power of giving.  
Moses has given so much to his people, only to see them act foolishly.  
He knows that they are in the wrong.  
Even so, knowing that they deserve God's judgment, he still intercedes for them,  
saying, "Lord, if you intend to end my people's story, know that I love them too much to abandon them.  
End my story, too!" That's stewardship.  
God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him  
should not perish but have everlasting life. That's stewardship, too.  
What kind of steward are you of your blessings?  
If you don't give the whole of your being unto God and others, you will never grasp the wonder  
of the power of giving.  
If that is so, you will never appreciate the great idea that runs throughout the story of the universe.

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October 19, 2008

First in the Series, The Powers of Being