



One of my first experiences with stewardship that actually stuck with me was during my youth group days with my home congregation. One of our fundraising tactics was called a noisy offering, where after the more impressive golden-appearing plates were passed around the pews, collecting the paper bills and checks, us not-overly-excited teenagers would follow the veteran ushers up and down the aisles passing around these relatively cheap metal cans, where people could drop in spare change and unleash this rather annoying noise to signify to everybody else in the

sanctuary that they just financially supported us youth on our next venture beyond the farming community. Granted, it may not have rivaled the final tally of the first round of offering, and, of course, that wasn't our only fundraising tactic, of sorts. Nevertheless, I still remember the noise, that, for my teenage ears was rather annoying, but looking back, it was a holy reminder that a little bit of this, and a little bit of that, might still give just enough for a memory to be made to last a lifetime.

The venture beyond our farming community that particular year was for the ELCA Youth Gathering, which is a commitment made by our wider church to ensure a few days in a larger city in this country, where youth, Lutheran or otherwise, can come together for stadium-capacity worships and small group Bible study and community service and numerous other fellowship activities, oftentimes bringing in tens of thousands of teenagers, in hopes of providing the time and space for a memory to be made to last a lifetime. Except, with all due respect to the wonderful proceedings in Atlanta, Georgia, including the amazement to see tens of thousands of youth in one place worshipping with excitement, what I remember most is not what happened in the Georgia Dome, but it was in the same sanctuary that an annoying offering was brought in by us small town teens.

I still remember our youth group director standing right in front of the pulpit giving the obligatory talk of extending appreciation to all those in the pews who supported us so that we could go at all, and then recounting our day-to-day experience in the Peach State. Then, all of a sudden, he broke down in tears when he was attempting to describe one of the musicians who led the enormous-scale worships. The pianist played with so much passion, and he sang with so much emotion, as if he was truly giving his all to us, not to mention to God. And it was the oddest thing that through all the songs, his eyes were as wide open as possible, almost as if he was seeing a vision of the Divine, almost as if what he was playing could very well lift up the souls of teenagers who aren't always the most excited about the whole worship thing, almost as if that he felt called to give us a memory to last a lifetime.

And he especially did for our youth group director, as he broke down in tears attempting to let our church family know that that pianist-singer was blind. He couldn't understand how he pulled it off: yes, stewarding musical gifts and talents, to be sure, but in that gargantuan stadium, on that make-shift stage, our youth group director was convinced he had witnessed the transcendent beauty of God. And as much as I was moved by those worships, the memory to last a lifetime was witnessing the faith of a youth leader breaking down in tears.

I doubt that's what the Psalmist had in mind with the words: "I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the assembly of the congregation." But I like to think the beauty of Scripture is that it certainly can be fulfilled in ways that the original author had no idea just how

far the transcendent beauty of God can go. I had my thanks to give that Sunday when we did our obligatory talk to our home congregation, but it turned into an appreciation of my whole heart to see our leader be overcome with joy and awe.

So, be careful church, not just in these few weeks when we do our obligatory stewardship talks, but in all instances of us being the church: be careful of the impact you can make even with a little bit of this and a little bit of that, because you just might give the time and space for a memory to be made to last a lifetime. With a little bit of this and a little bit of that, yes, you may send youth off to places for their own God-moments, of sorts. But you might also help someone believe with whatever condition they are facing in life, that they may just have more than enough Holy Spirit flowing through them to raise up the souls of tens of thousands. Be careful of the impact you have, because there is this God who defied sin and death, and rose out of a tomb that tried its best to shut him up forever. That same power that set forth a memory that is still rising up thousands of years later: that same power is still being unleashed in all of you to share with the world. So, for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!