

STEWARDSHIP SEASON

Rev. Gregory Flint

Mark 12: 38 – 44

November 8, 2009

We're in the midst of our stewardship season as a church. Again this morning we heard another "Witnessing Steward" talk about what this church means. I for one look forward to these witnesses each week. Some of the best messages from this pulpit come from those who dare to open their hearts and talk to us about church.

And in the hallway down toward the office, there's a stewardship season display of some wonderful enlarged photos from our life together as church. If you haven't yet wandered down that hall, do it after worship. I walk that hall many times a week and still find myself stopping and looking again at the pictures and smiling.

I think it's because there's so much hope in those pictures. And Lord knows these days we need things that generate hope – don't we?

So take that walk of hope down the upper hallway. For it's the stewardship season. And maybe stewardship begins with hope. We give to our church and to things in the wider community because it is a profoundly hopeful thing to do.

And then downstairs in the Atrium, there are posters on the wall with those ten reasons for giving to the church. You can sign your name on the poster that most closely reflects your reason for giving to our church or to anything for that matter. For stewardship is not just about church. This is really the season to reflect on Stewardship with a capital "S" which is about all our life choices.

I signed a poster, but you also received from me a letter in which I shared another giving reason. That during the past months of Susan's health challenges, she and I cannot imagine what it would have been like without the support of our church family. We know there are lots of people who somehow get through tough stuff without a church, but for Susan and me the prayers and expressions of love and offers of help from you have made all the difference.

And it's not just because I'm one of your pastors. That kind of community support, the prayers and gestures of love, goes on all the time here in so many ways with so many people. It's what we do as church with and for one another. And it matters. And I simply cannot imagine my life without it....

Then next Sunday will be the culmination of our stewardship season – Consecration Sunday. All our choirs will be part of worship in a joyous celebration of our life together. Pledge cards will be in the pew racks. And worship will build to an invitation to join a procession of consecration – making sacred our giving commitments for the next year by bringing the cards forward.

It's an altar call - a very un-congregational-like thing to do. And it was with trepidation that our stewardship leadership first agreed to try it some years ago. What if no one will come forward they wondered? That will be awkward. So we asked certain people beforehand who we thought would agree to come forward. And we placed them at strategic places around the sanctuary so there would at least be the illusion of enough people coming forward.

Well, on that first Consecration Sunday, when the invitation to come forward was spoken, virtually the whole congregation stood up as one. Why do you think that was? And it's been the same every year. Why is that?

A cynic might say that it's the herd response – somebody comes forward so others just follow, like sheep instinctively tagging along one behind the other. Well, the cynic doesn't know much about Congregationalists.

Congregationalists don't tag along behind anybody. Congregationalists are more like cats than sheep – aren't we?

And I see the looks on people's faces as they come forward in that intergenerational procession, including the oldest and the youngest of us. It's not the look of those just following the crowd. Nor is it the expression of people just paying their dues.

And what I see on people's faces is different than the, "Ok, this is what I'm supposed to do," expression that I see at community fund raisers and charity events. And community money raisers are fun and important, but I will see next Sunday something different in people's eyes.

Sure, our church depends on those pledges of financial support. But taking your pledge card to the altar is not really about a church budget. And it's not about supporting a cause or charity.

Rather, Consecration Sunday is about our very identity. It's about who we are first and finally. Which is our soul-deep belief that there is a Creator, Creating Spirit, whose Being is Giver. And from that Divine Being our lives come as gift...for the purpose of adding love to this world.

That's what I've seen over the years reflected in people's faces as they join that consecration procession. That's what I feel as I carry my own commitment card to the altar. It's about identity really.

We know who we are. We know we are not just the molecular accidents of an unholy universe. We know there's a great purpose for our lives. We know we've been given life for a reason. We know there's God-given generosity in our very DNA. We know that God needs us to help in the healing of the world.

Card in hand, we know as surely as we know anything in this life, that to love and give of ourselves, to create community and do justice, to live generously with open hearts, open minds, and open hands...and to model such life stewardship for our children...to consecrate what we can for something greater than ourselves, is to be most fully who we are created to be.

So Consecration Sunday and this stewardship season, is not really about a church budget. The church budget for 2010 will be whatever it will be. But it will be the looks on each others' faces next Sunday that we will remember. People, people of all ages, knowing who we are – stewards of God's gift of life....

Interesting, coincidence or not, that when our stewardship season calendar was set months ago, and the leaders asked me to do the stewardship sermon this Sunday, I didn't realize the Lectionary text would be the one about Jesus watching a consecration procession of people putting money into the Temple offering box.

And as the text is usually preached, the big money givers are critiqued for their self-righteousness; while the poor widow's sacrificial giving is honored. And it's assumed that the big givers' giving didn't mean as much as the widow's.

Sure, one can read the text that way, especially when it is coupled with the preceding verses about the showy prayers of those calling attention to themselves. But I wonder if that's the only way to interpret this text.

I mean, it says the wealthier ones put in large sums...which they should. It's the biblical principle of proportional giving. Those of us who have been given more in life ought to give more.

And then it says that the widow gave her two small coins, which is what she had to give. And Jesus noticed and pointed that out.

And volumes of commentaries have been written about whether or not the wealthy gave too little. Or even that the widow gave too much.

I don't know. Maybe what Jesus was really saying is that all of us, no matter our net worth, have a need to give. And that generosity is a great spiritual virtue, be you rich or poor.

And this morning, I choose to think that after the wealthy and the widow made their gifts, they all went inside and had a real sit-down-together, family-style dinner. And the poor widow sat at a table with some who had dropped a bundle into the giving box.

And before they ate, they joined hands around the table and prayed a prayer of thanksgiving for all that God has given. And they knew around the table – wealthy and poor alike – they all knew that being generous is one of life's great joys and privileges.

And at our dinner following worship next Sunday, we'll know it again too.