

Thinking About Stewardship

Mark 12:38-44

November 11, 2018 – Twenty-fifth Sunday After Pentecost

Friends, this is Stewardship Sunday, a time when we ask your estimate of giving for the coming year. That estimate is hugely important; as our finance committee plans the coming year's budget. That being said, it is just that – an estimate. I hope you will do your best to meet your estimate; but I also hope you will not consider this a "promise." Things change; situations change; finances change. If something happens that you are not able to meet your estimate, that's okay. If it's a minor change, that's okay; don't worry about it. If it's a significant change, I hope you'll let our Financial Secretary know so he can adjust your "estimate of giving." And, if it's a devastating change, I hope you'll let me know, so we can pray together and face life's challenges together.

Now, having said all that, I also need to tell you that, while our scripture for today is often read on Stewardship Sunday, I did not specifically choose this scripture. In fact, I was quite surprised when I opened the lectionary for today and found this to be the scripture. Here we read about the wealthy walking around in their long fancy robes, flaunting their wealth, showing off, while cheating the underprivileged out of what little they have. They like to make a big show of the money they contribute, even though they contribute precious little compared to their total worth. (As an aside, I have known clergy that stopped wearing robes precisely because of this scripture.)

Then Jesus points to the poor widow, who puts two small copper coins in the treasury – her entire net worth. Now I told you a few weeks ago; and I say it again on this Stewardship Sunday, we don't want your entire net worth. We don't want your last two copper coins. God does not want you to give your last two copper coins. God and your church care about your welfare. I hope and I trust that none of your estimates of giving will create a significant hardship for you. And I say this because I have known of situations where individuals have been so moved by their church or their pastor's preaching that they have majorly overextended themselves. (Would that my sermons had such a powerful affect.)

One of the big debates in church circles is whether clergy should know how much parishioners contribute to the church. I have a friend who strongly feels they should. He states that giving to the church is a spiritual matter; and the pastor's job is to support the congregation's spiritual health. He states, "You would not go to the doctor and refuse to tell him your blood pressure; you should not refuse to tell the pastor how you support your church." Now before going further, let me say, "I do not know how much anyone in this congregation gives to the church, and I really don't want to know. That's between you and God." I do believe that supporting the church is a spiritual matter; so, yes I believe that is truly between you and God.

Those who feel that the pastor should not know how much parishioners give say, “If the pastor knows, he might not treat everyone in his congregation equally.” To that I say, “Shame on the pastor who would show preference to the rich people who throw lots of money in the treasury.” The poor widow certainly deserves the pastor’s care. Still, on the flip side, perhaps the rich also need the pastor’s attention. They certainly need the pastor’s prayers.

No, I don’t want to know how much money any person gives the church. I seek to treat everyone as a child of God. I seek to love and care for everyone, no exceptions. The amount you put on your “Estimate of Giving” card is between you and God. Our Financial Secretary knows your estimate, so he can provide a total to our Finance Committee for budgetary reasons; and our Financial Secretary is the only one who knows.

I know one large church in our district, in which no one knows the parishioner’s estimate of giving. The Finance Committee plans a budget based on last year’s giving with a modest increase for inflation. The church collects Estimate of Giving cards in sealed envelopes with the parishioner’s name on the outside of the envelope; but the envelope is never opened. Of course, the church continues to issue quarterly statements to the members, and it informs the members of how the church is meeting its budget; but then, at the end of the year, the sealed envelope is returned to the member as a reminder of their commitment to God and to the church. No one, literally no one other than God and the parishioner actually knows whether the commitment has been met. (I see our finance folks shaking their heads; but it is an intriguing idea.)

Then there is the opposite extreme. I once attended an African American Baptist Church where, at the time of the offering, everyone who tithed, everyone who gave at least 10% of their income was invited to come forward and place their offering on the altar. When that was complete, the offering was collected from the rest of the folks. Seemed to me an awful lot like people making a show of how much money they gave to the church. As a visitor, I of course did not go forward; but I truly felt uncomfortable by the entire process. I think I’d rather keep the cards sealed and keep my offering totally between me and God.

Friends, the church is not about money. The church is about love. The church is about experiencing the amazing love of God; and the church is about sharing that love with God’s people both within and outside the congregation. If we ever, if I ever seem to place money, or physical gifts before the gift of God’s love given and shared, I hope you will “call” me on it.

That being said, the church exists in a real, physical world. The church cannot be about sharing the love of God without a well maintained building as a base in which to meet and from which to work. The church cannot be about sharing the love of God without staff dedicated to providing daily leadership and oversight in that sharing and caring. And perhaps most importantly, the church cannot be about reaching out to share that love with the world without serving the physical needs of hunger and housing and health care and education. It’s hard to

convince people that God loves them when they are starving or hurting or homeless.

The theme of our Stewardship Campaign for the second year has been *Our Faithful Journey*; and *Our Faithful Journey* long range plan is been guided by five principles:

- We appreciate and invest in our youth.
- We actively serve our neighbors in North Olmsted and the wider world.
- We provide opportunities for people to grow in their faith.
- We welcome and nurture a diverse congregation who becomes our extended family.
- We foster lasting personal relationships, which are especially important in a digital world.

Those Guiding Principles have been in every bulletin and every newsletter since they were established a little over a year ago. I have them taped over my desk in my office as a constant reminder. And still, as a read and reflect on these five principles, they really are all about one thing: experiencing, growing in, and sharing the amazing love of God. And that's what this card is all about. Your 2019 contribution to our church which this card represents is all about experiencing, growing in, and sharing the amazing love of God.

You know, if the church knows your birthday and/or your anniversary, you will get a personal greeting card from me, a reminder that I am thinking about you and praying for you on your special day. It's a small way that I can share God's love with you. A few years back, Hallmark had a slogan, "Nothing says love like a Hallmark card!" Well, it's a great advertising slogan; but I respond, "Nothing says love like this book"; and, as we are called by this book, "Nothing says love like the church, and the work of the church in the world."

And so, as you bring your Estimate of Giving card forward, I ask that you think of it as a love card, a care card, a representation of the love shared within your church and extended by your church. It is your part of the sharing of God's love; and you and I both know, when we share God's love, we get back more love than we give.

May God continue to bless this church, the work that we do, and the love that we share in his holy name. Amen.

Rev. Mark L. Steiger, Pastor
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