

“Plain Talk about Stewardship: For Shandon”
Delivered Sunday, September 20, 2009
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Mark 9:30-37
For You, for Shandon, for God Series

There was an article in The Presbyterian Outlook this summer that presented some interesting research on congregations across the country. Some of the congregations were growing and some were shrinking. The research report said that there was only one consistent factor that differentiated the ones that were thriving from the ones that were not. The reason may not be what you would first suspect. It was not a liberal or conservative theology. It was not the old culture war of pitting traditional worship against contemporary worship. It was not even geography explained away by shifting population demographics. Consistently, churches that were thriving operated out of what the report called a mindset of abundance. Thriving churches have this attitude and I quote, “We have something to offer, and whether we are rich or poor, conservative or liberal, praise songs or hymnbook, by the grace of God we have everything we really need to be the church.” On the other hand, the congregations that were not thriving operated out of what the researchers called a mindset of scarcity. “There is not enough to go around. We do not have enough resources to offer much, and we won’t be able to do a lot until somebody gives us what we need.” (1)

It is hard to walk around Shandon and imagine that we operate out of anything other than a mindset of abundance. Every weekday this church is filled with the laughter and joyful noise of 300 young children in our Child Development Center and After School Program. While the CDC is financially independent of the church in terms of operating costs, it is our largest outreach to the community and ministry of space. Our youth ministry continues to grow, and with David Jones’ good leadership promises to take off. The music program for all ages – from young children through adults – is ever expanding. When you look behind the scenes at the level of commitment to outreach, this church is pretty impressive – sixty members serving Meals on Wheels (we need a few more by the way), a team of regulars at the Washington Street soup kitchen for the homeless, increasing numbers of folks committed to our global mission efforts, particularly in Honduras. Whenever and wherever we perceive that God is calling us I hope that we at Shandon will always operate out of a mindset of abundance and say, “Yes, we have the resources, let’s do it.”

Having said that - truth be told – while we may have the mindset of abundance, we do not always have the financial resources to do as much as we feel God is calling us to do. These old buildings are always stirring up mischief with their leaky roof issues, and in the last couple of weeks someone stole the copper from the McDonald Youth Center condensers ruining them, and the boiler needs to be replaced so we’ll have heat here in the sanctuary this winter – that alone is a \$ 47,000 expense we were not counting on. And if you are one of those folks who gets grumpy about building expenditures, know also that the mission trips this summer went over budget, and we are trying harder to make sure salaries for all our employees are fair, and given the amount we spend on these gracious spaces, on mission and benevolences we have less than we would like to spend on program for a church this size.

What I have learned in my time at Shandon is that there are some fairly interesting turf wars when it comes to the church budget that can pit this area of ministry against that area of

ministry, and if we are not careful we can begin to sound: like we have a mindset of scarcity, or B) like the disciples in our scripture this morning who think we know exactly what it takes to be great in the sight of the Lord. So let's look at the scripture before us and see if it has any clues about what it means to be faithful in the stewardship of our common church life.

These few verses of scripture unfold like a scene from a play where several conversations are going on at once without anyone really listening to any of them. In the opening conversation Jesus is offering a picture of his near future which will include betrayal, suffering and death. Then we find out that Jesus' words seem to have fallen on deaf ears because the disciples are arguing among themselves about something completely unrelated to Jesus' own impending suffering and death. Which one of them was the greatest? They jostle about. After all they had left a lot behind to follow Jesus – homes, family, fishing businesses. Their mission had led them down a lot of dusty roads, beside sickbeds, and around dinner tables with folks they wouldn't have been caught dead with before Jesus came along. Had not at least a couple of those disciples earned a medal saying "Faithful Follower," or "Top Notch Miracle Assistant," or "Disciple of the Month"? Who can blame them for wanting a little recognition, a little ceremony, a little theme music for the journey? So while they were huddled in this Palestine's Got Talent competition among themselves, Jesus must have just been shaking his head, going over his lesson plans again, re-writing his sermon, coming up with a Word for Children that will make sense to them.

The truth is Jesus had told them over and over, that true greatness is to be found not in self-congratulation but in self-serving, not in winning but in losing, not in conquering, not in ambition, not in success, not in surviving even. Rather the path to greatness is humility, following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ searching for the lost, feeding the poor, touching the sick, including the last person you would want to include, standing up for something worth dying for, making disciples of others. Once again, Jesus shows them what he means with an object lesson. He takes a child in his arms and says, if you receive a child, you receive me, in fact, if you receive a child like this one, you receive God.

Why a child? Children were not valued as the center of attention as they are today. A child was another mouth to feed. A child did not contribute much of anything to the household, a child was at the lowest rung of social standing. There is also a play on words at work here that our English translations completely miss. In Greek the word for "little child" sounds so much like the word for "servant," that they could be easily confused in the hearing of the disciples. Children and servants were of equally low social status – at the bottom rung. Jesus' use of a child to get his point across is a powerful and even shocking depiction of the paradoxical values of God's will and reign. Against all worldly measures of success the church is called for this one purpose: to follow Jesus Christ who lead us on a counter-cultural journey.

As pastor of Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City, Michael Lindvall, has put it: "The world says strive to be first. Jesus says the first shall be last. The world says watch out for number one. Jesus says you are not number one. The world says tit-for-tat. Jesus says do good to those who hate you. The world says charity begins at home. Jesus says give the guy in need your coat and your shirt, too. The world says don't be a fool. Jesus says - blessed are the merciful. The world says being rich means getting all the stuff you want. Jesus says if you want to be rich, give your stuff away." (2)

If you want to be great, Jesus says, serve others. The church is the only place I know where disciples of this way of life are called, and formed, and sent out to serve, and welcome, and invite others to live the Christian life. We do not know the abundant life God gives until we

figure out how to give ourselves away. All it takes for us as individuals, and all it takes for Shandon Presbyterian Church in every aspect of our ministry of space, worship and music, Christian education, outreach – all of it – all it takes is a mindset of abundance knowing that all we really need has been given to us in Jesus Christ. A mindset of abundance. And by God's grace we will thrive. We thrive.

NOTES

- 1) Michael Lindvall, "Subway Attitude," The Presbyterian Outlook, 6/29/09.
- 2) Michael Lindvall, "Counterintuitive Success," The Brick Presbyterian Church, New York City, 9/24/06.