

“Plain Talk about Stewardship: For God”
Delivered Sunday, September 27, 2009
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Mark 9:38-50
For You, for Shandon, for God Series

This is not scripture for the faint of heart. Once Jesus has set his face on Jerusalem forecasting his impending suffering and death, Mark’s gospel leads us into tough territory with serious lessons about faith and discipleship. Mark doesn’t have any intention of prettying it up. But let me be clear about this: This is hyperbolic speech, exaggerated to catch our attention. Jesus is not advocating self-mutilation. Jesus is asking the disciples to free themselves of anything which might hinder fellowship with God, for themselves or any other person. The language is extreme because everything is at stake. Jesus has been sending out an invitation, saying he desires to welcome all people – everyone – into the joyous feast of God’s reign. And the disciples have been slow to understand.

Previously, in this same chapter, the disciples had tried their hand at a healing miracle and had failed, frustrated that they could not do what Jesus could. Now, they are upset because somebody outside of their little clan is healing and casting out demons in Jesus’ name. John comes forward and says of this other healer, “Jesus, we tried to stop him because he’s not following us!” So the lesson begins with John’s concern about a so-called outsider, and ends with an injunction for the community to be at peace with one another. What holds this beginning and end together is this intense little sermon by Jesus on tolerance. He calls for an attitude of inclusiveness to those on the outside, and with hard images encourages a posture of self-reflection for those within the community. Be tolerant, Jesus says. Don’t cause others trying to follow me to stumble.

I read recently about a church in London that has a prayer carved in stone above the doorway which reads: “O God, make the door of this house wide enough to receive all who need human love and fellowship; narrow enough to shut out all envy, pride and strife. Make its threshold smooth enough to be no stumbling-block to children, nor to straying feet, but rugged and strong enough to turn back the tempter’s power. God, make the door of this house the gateway to thine eternal kingdom.” (1) For all those coming in, and going out, Jesus calls us to make the doors of Shandon Presbyterian Church a gateway to the kingdom of God.

When we talk about stewardship, so often we couch the conversation in terms of our personal relationships with God. And stewardship is personal. It begins in gratitude with the recognition that all that we have and all that we are is a gift from God. But this odd, little lesson before us today expands our vision of stewardship. We give to the church because here we are about building and expanding the kingdom of God on earth, and inviting others to be part of Christ’s community. According to Jesus we do not get in the way of anyone who would come to him or call on his name. That’s what Jesus wanted his disciples to understand, and that’s where he is calling the church – to the broad, inclusive mission of Christian hospitality: To little children we say, “Come; let us teach you about the love of God.” To our youth, we say, “Join us; we want to hear how God is present to you in your life.” To young adults and older adults we say, “Share your faith with us and with one another, bring your doubts, your questions, your deep convictions, and may our faith mature together in showing God’s love to the world.” As preacher and professor Fred Craddock has said: “The final work of grace is to make us gracious.”

In order for Shandon Presbyterian Church to offer the gracious, disciple-making hospitality for God's children of all ages, we need your financial support. This is why we circle around to this matter of money every year, and this year our stewardship theme is: "for you.....for Shandon....and for God."

Let's take them one by one: For you. We give of our time, talent and financial resources as a tangible expression of gratitude. It is a spiritual discipline that witnesses to what we say we believe. To make a pledge to the church is to say to ourselves, "I am so grateful to God for all that God has done for me, that I respond with a glad and generous heart."

For Shandon. The church needs our financial resources to be the kind of community God is calling us to be – a community of faith and worship, dedicated to Christian Education and nurture, so that we may go into the world to serve, to work for peace and justice, and to share God's love with all people. We need your financial resources to engage in Christian ministry with "a mindset of abundance" so that we can be a thriving congregation.

Finally, for God. When Jesus says, "Do not stop others who are doing good in my name....do not put any stumbling block before those who are growing in faith....have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another," Jesus is asking us to pick up his work for God's sake. "Join me," he might as well be saying, "in proclaiming the kingdom of God and spreading the love of God in the world." We give as partners with Christ in God's transformative work in the world.

It takes nearly 1.7 million dollars for the annual operation of this church – to provide for our ministry of space whenever we or any outside mission organization uses these facilities; to provide for our worship, our music, our Christian education and nurture, to respond to the needs of the community and the world in Christian compassion. By God's grace, we seek to be good stewards of the gifts you entrust to our care, but we also have some challenges. While we have 426 pledging households, we have 212 active member households who do not pledge and do not give as far as we can tell. If you do not currently contribute financially we pray that you will join the rest of us in supporting the work of Jesus Christ through the ministry of Shandon. We have 97 households who give, but who do not make a pledge. If you count yourself among that number, we hope that you will consider making a pledge so that we can better determine our next year's budget. If you are a younger adult or in your middle years, I hope that you understand that a large percentage of our annual income – that supports all the activities - is coming from an much older generation of folks who tithe, many giving ten percent of their fixed incomes. If you were not raised on the biblical admonition of tithing, to return to the Lord ten percent of our bounty for the Lord's work, you don't have to start at ten percent, but I do encourage you to make your pledge based on a percentage of your income – be it one percent or five percent and move toward tithing as you mature in faith.

Now, some of you may wonder, how dare she stand up there in this economy and presume to tell us what to do. First of all, I am simply preaching the gospel. We give because Jesus Christ calls us to invest ourselves first and foremost in the Kingdom of God, to invite others in, to make and nurture disciples, to spread the good news of God's love for the world to the world.

Secondly, I dare ask you to step up your commitment because I was inspired by something a preacher friend of mine said during stewardship season in his church a year ago, when the economic forecast was more dismal than it is today.

Bob Dunham is the pastor of University Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill, a congregation very much like this one with its commitment to college students and campus

ministry. One of our preaching group, a younger minister navigating her first stewardship sermon in a new church, asked what we should say to our congregations in such a bad economy last year. Bob wrote back to her: There is a lot of uncertainty in the air here...Our senior members are particularly vulnerable, and a number of our folks have been laid off. Still, this past week, when our officers made their early commitments for 2009 as an encouragement to the congregation, they came in with pledges that increased more than eight percent over this year's commitments. I was blown away. One of the elders, who recently lost his job, increased his pledge by 25 percent. As one of our stewardship committee members said to the congregation, "We have always known the church is important; it is even more important now, for us and those beyond the walls who depend on us." Getting himself ready for Stewardship Dedication Sunday last fall, Bob said finally he would have his "Eyes wide open... realistic and empathetic...but hopeful and grateful." (2)

We are a month away from Stewardship Dedication Sunday, but look around you, eyes wide open, realistic and empathetic, hopeful and grateful. It's easy to see the need for your money to help this church be the gracious, disciple-making community Christ himself is calling us to be. Young Wyatt's baptism this morning is the 26th baptism we have celebrated so far this year since January. Our fastest growing demographic in terms of membership is young adults and families with young children. We are raising children now on commitments and investments made beginning in 1913 when the Shandon Mission was founded in this neighborhood. And some of the most generous supporters of this congregation today began tithing in the 1940's and 1950's – and still do – enabling us to be the vibrant community of faith we are. Those of us who are younger, need to learn from the depth and breadth of their joyful commitment, and with gratitude begin to take their place. Not just for ourselves and for our children and what we get out of the programs offered. Not just for the neighborhood and the city dwellers who are always welcome here. Not just for Shandon and the continuation of this old church's standing in the community and its ministry. Not even just for the poor – the hungry and the homeless, all those whom we serve here and abroad. More than that, we give as partners in Christ's service. We give for God. For God. AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) George Appleton, editor, *The Oxford Book of Prayer*, p. 73, with thanks to Patrick Willson's sermon "What So Darned Important?" published in *Lectionary Homiletics*.
- 2) I am grateful to Jon Walton of our Moveable Feast preaching group for lifting up this email interchange among us as a sermon illustration in "A Good Investment for a Bad Economy," First Presbyterian Church, New York City, 11/16/08.