

Better Times Ahead

5/1/05

Next Sunday is, amongst that varied list of other happenings, Stewardship Sunday. It is the date designated for you to return your Pledge Card, if you have not already. We will receive them and ask for God's blessing during a special litany. However, I am not going to give a Stewardship Sermon next week. That is happening at this very moment, if you had not already guessed it. You see, I still have enough conceit to suppose that if I am inspirational this week, it might just impact on your giving.

The fact is, of course, that people tend to tune out the Minister who talks about Stewardship. It's one of those things that people generally discredit, even if they respect the Pastor. "Of course he wants us to give more money, he works for the church." "Her salary is dependent upon our support; what else can she say?" Or if you dare to speak about your own generous financial giving, "A minister has to be generous to the church...But I am not a minister! "

Well, at least this morning I stand here as the Minister who has not spoken to you before about Stewardship. And I am going to say very little about money! So let's get the money stuff out of the way! Although in reality, no matter what I say, it does have a lot to do with dollars and cents when you come right down to it. Two things. First, people have been pointing out to you that there is a deficit. This is a real deficit. So far, you have responded to the appeal. I applaud you and hope that it will continue. It is the sign of a committed church that when needs (in this case a shortfall) are explained, people do what they can to help.

Second, while it is easier to support specific appeals, I believe it is tougher and tougher these days to pledge against a proposed budget. As an example of

what I mean, say the church budget for the coming year is projected at \$150,000. What then is expected of me? Do I figure my share of the cost? If there are 150 pledging units, should I give \$1,000 a year, hoping others will do the same. But if endowment and rentals pay \$75,000 of the total, do I only give \$750 because that is all that's needed to balance the budget? I am pained when people look to the budget only and try to gauge their giving. It's almost impossible!

We live in a real world and our needs are real. This year's campaign slogan, in fact, is "Take Hold of Real Life." Obviously a budget is a real issue. And our giving is the only way to enable the work of the church to continue. Otherwise important programs are cut. I have yet to see a church with an inflated budget. Generally people project to spend exactly what they did last year or a little.

Yet, rather than pledging to a budget (which is historically what we attempt to do), I suggest that we begin by forgetting the figures and look to our faith.

There is the story of a pastor who got up one Sunday and announced to her congregation: "I have good news and bad news. The good news is, we have enough money to pay for our new building program. The bad news is, it's still out there in your pockets."

We are an affluent society. We generally have more than we need. Our pockets are full. Yesterday our youngest daughter, who will graduate college in two weeks and move to Worcester (Yeah!), came home to take her belongings to her new apartment. (Yeah!) This means we have an empty room upstairs. Do we go purchase all new furniture? No, we have enough and more in our attic to easily furnish her room! In our churches, we generally have plenty too. Maybe not in the third world society, but in the pockets of church members in the United States.

And we attain much satisfaction from what we have and the comfortable conditions in which we live. I would daresay that most of us also get much

satisfaction and fulfillment from our participation in the life of the church. It is a way of life for us. Church has been and will continue to be a second home. Here we learn the lessons of faith, explore them with our family, find communion with friends, and understand our lives as part of the carrying out of God's purpose for this creation. We would not be here today unless we had found spiritual satisfaction as well as support during transitional times in our lives – the baptisms, marriages, and funerals. Not to mention food for the day to day journey. God is bound into all we do as the contextual tapestry of our days. Taking hold of Real Life is to realize that God has blessed us with abundance.

How then, with this is mind, can we possibly respond. To God? For all that we have? Let's reread some of John's gospel message. John 14: 15-21. This passage is written to disciples who may have wondered what would possibly happen without Jesus present to lead and sustain them. "I will ask God and God will give you another Advocate," Jesus says. *This One will be with you forever! Would I leave you orphaned? Not after all this! Because I live, you also will live. Those who love me will be loved by God!*

When I hear these words of assurance, I cannot help but think that there will be better times ahead. These are words of hope and promise. They provide the rationale for going on! To Christ's disciples and to us!

How so? If we believe that things are good now – if we have satisfaction and fulfillment from our lives of faith – imagine that God's plan includes not just now but the future as well. How important (then) is the church? The church, as God's instrument of fellowship and love, lives to see that all people might know abundance. Indeed, this is God's plan. Abundance and Peace! For all! As the Word of God is shared, and as others come to know God's presence, what joy there will be! When all gather literally and figuratively around the table.

Jesus is not only describing a better future but also appealing to his followers to be committed to the implementation of God's reign. Read on! *The Advocate will teach you all you need to know. I am leaving Peace with you. Do not be afraid! Rejoice that the entire world will one day know the love of God.*

If we believe, in all good faith, that God has blessed us. Has blessed the church as the caring community that will help usher in this new age! If you believe that the world stands in need of God's loving presence, then this vision of a "far better day" will not let us rest until all are one before God. Until all know justice, mercy and peace.

We received a story via email this week that I would like to share with you:

A minister was preoccupied with thoughts of how he was going to ask the congregation to come up with more money than they were expecting for repairs to the church building. Therefore, he was annoyed to find that the regular organist was sick and a substitute had been brought in at the last minute. The substitute wanted to know what to play. "Here's a copy of the service," he said impatiently. "But, you'll have to think of something to play after I make the announcement about the finances."

During the service, the minister paused and said, "Brothers and Sisters, we are in great difficulty; the roof repairs cost twice as much as we expected and we need \$4,000 more. Any of you who can pledge \$100 or more, please stand up." At that moment, the substitute organist played "The Star Spangled Banner."

And that is how the substitute became the regular organist!

Imagine what the church could accomplish, if it pledged not according to difficulty - because the roof – the sky – is falling. Imagine if we gave as a

testimony to the richness of God's Promise. There are better times ahead! You better believe it. God has plans for us. For this church. God is still speaking. Such a Promise should be enough for all of us to stand with joy and applaud!

When we share the sacred vision of what will be...we give fully...that God's realm might be the Beloved Community of all. We live in abundance; we share as fully as we are able the blessings of God's love.

* The Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church attempted in 2003 to spell out exactly how privileged Christians are to exist as God's Beloved Community. They also point out the challenges of living in relationship to God. As residents of the Beloved Community, "we are at home, where we have access to that which sustains life....Our relationship with one another, with God, and with the whole creation is one that enables peace and justice to reign....In the Beloved Community...self-interest is satisfied only when all people are valued and all have enough to live...when all participate in work that is meaningful...when differences are not just tolerated but create a dynamic interaction between the poor and the affluent, the young and the old, the artist and the scientist, the farmer and the manufacturer, the wolf and the lamb."