

"An Awkward Conversation"

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At the risk of beating a dead horse, it is Dedication Sunday. You've most likely received your pledge card in the mail. If not or if you have misplaced it, we've inserted them into the bulletin to make it convenient for you. Some of you have already filled it out and turned it in, and for that, we give thanks. Some of you brought yours today to bring forward during the final hymn, and for that, we give thanks.

No doubt you are all shifting uncomfortably in your pews right about now, settling in for the yearly money sermon. This past week at our Wednesday Night Fellowship program, I posed the question, "How many of you here came tonight excited to talk about money?" As you can imagine, nobody raised his or her hand, and I will not ask for a show of hands now. Indeed, it is an awkward conversation.

We spent some time Wednesday night talking about why it's so uncomfortable. We talked about the cultural taboos around discussions of money. One person mentioned that our budgets and the way we spend our money is a personal and private thing. We don't want the general public nosing around in our personal affairs. Someone else mentioned that we are often labeled or categorized by how much money we make. If we make a lot of money, we are judged for being rich, snobby or selfish. If we make a small amount of money, we risk being perceived as unimportant or incompetent, so we tend to avoid talking about it altogether to escape those labels or judgments.

In the church, we use the word Stewardship to describe such conversations. One of the critical mistakes that the church has made through the years in talking about Stewardship, however, is talking exclusively about money. The other mistake the church has made is to only talk about Stewardship once a year, during Stewardship month. My own source of awkwardness around this subject began when I was a college student attending a church near campus. I longed to make a spiritual connection to a community of faith so far from home, and I liked this particular church's style of worship because it felt so familiar. The pastor at this church did a better job of talking about Stewardship all year around, but it wasn't long before I realized that he wasn't interested in what this poor college student had to offer. The movie "Jerry Maguire" was popular at the time, and my friends and I began to jokingly refer to his sermons as "Show me the money" sermons.

At a Sunday School class one week, we were talking about stewardship, and we broke into pairs to share more deeply about our attitudes around stewardship. This precious little old lady whose name I regret to say I cannot remember had taken an interest in me and made a beeline to be my partner. I decided to take a chance and share with her that while I understood that giving our money was important, I often felt shame because money was



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not a gift I could give generously at the time. She then confided in me that she had a lot of money, and she felt that was the only value that the church saw in her. That conversation opened my eyes to the ways our cultural understandings of money and power had infested the church. The church is called to be counter-cultural, and yet, our attitudes and interactions with money often mirror that of our society. Sadly, that was the last time I went to church while I was in college.

In preparation for this Sunday, that conversation has been playing in my mind over and over again. Indeed, many conversations I've had with people in the church about stewardship through the years have reflected similar themes. This morning's scripture offers what I hope is more robust and inclusive understanding of what it means to make an offering to God. It is a text that has the potential of carrying us from awkward and cynical to joyful and free. We will be reading from Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 12, verses 1-8. Listen this day to God's word for you:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴ For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶ We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸ the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Regrettably, this scripture was not on my radar as I wrestled with my insecurities regarding money and stewardship both through college and well into my 20s. At the start, Paul named what I believe is one of the most important contributions that any of us make at any phase of our lives. "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice." It is an acknowledgement that the primary location where we express and live out our values is in our bodies. How we use our bodies from sun up to sun down is our personal thesis statement about what we believe is important and how we might share that with the world. It is, fundamentally, about being present, about showing up.

For example, when you show up for the CROP walk like we did last week, you were making a statement about how you feel about world hunger and clean water. When you take the time to recycle, you are making a statement about how you feel about the planet and the importance of conservation, and so on. We often get tripped up on the words "living sacrifice," but in the ancient context, people would have heard the analogy to animal sacrifice. Sacrificing an animal does not require as much of us as being a living sacrifice. Paul was acknowledging that religious rituals can become detached and hollow over time,

that faith is more about an intentional, on-going, embodied way of living. To be a living sacrifice is to have some skin in the game.

Furthermore, Paul dedicated this whole first section of this morning's text to stewardship as an act of body, mind and spirit. He went on to challenge us to not be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. He understood that our minds are the drivers of what our bodies do. Our minds direct us where to go. If we are conformed to this world, then our bodies will reflect that.

So what kinds of messages does our world give us related to stewardship? The world tells us that there is not enough to go around, so you better go get yours. It is an economy of scarcity: There is not enough money for everybody, so you better hold onto it. You don't have enough time to help others, because you need to focus all your energies on you and yours. You aren't talented enough to teach a class or organize an event, so why even bother? We worry about saving enough for college, a home, retirement and end of life care. We worry that we won't be competitive enough to get a job, keep a job, or advance in our job, so we overwork and fill our lives and our kids' lives with so many extracurricular activities and resume builders that we barely take time to breathe or tend to our spiritual lives. We are afraid to take risks in using our gifts to try new things for fear of rejection or failure. These are the worldly messages in which we swim every single day.

But Paul's idea of our minds being transformed by spiritual worship flies in the face of this belief of scarcity. Christian activist, Shane Claiborne, said in a video we watched this past Wednesday, "God has given enough for our need, not our greed." When we resist the world's messaging, we are transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit and our minds renewed to discern God's will. When we ground ourselves in God's economy of abundance, this idea that there is enough manna and enough daily bread, we are freed from feelings of fear, worry, and inadequacy. We are liberated to show up, mind, body and spirit, and participate in God's kingdom.

The second section of this morning's text makes the point that stewardship is a relational, communal act. Paul noted that we do not present our bodies as a living sacrifice in isolation but as part of the one body in Christ. Each one of us has unique and essential gifts or ways of offering ourselves, and they are all critical. To be sure, we need money to do things like renovating the sanctuary, maintaining the campus and staffing the church. And if you have the ability to be generous financially, Paul would encourage you to do so. So would I.

But there are six other gifts listed there as well as many others woven throughout the bible. We have visionaries and dreamers, ministers and teachers, encouragers and givers, leaders and compassionate caregivers. All these things and many more add up to make the Church of Jesus Christ, and the church needs all of us, all of our bodies, all of our minds, all of our spirits, all of our gifts to be healthy and whole.

Stewardship need not be an awkward or uncomfortable conversation, because everyone has been invited to get swept up in and participate in God's Holy Work. It is a joy, it is a

celebration to bear witness to God's extravagance in our midst. Look around you. We decided to celebrate and re-dedicate the sanctuary today of all days, because it is a magnificent, tangible, inclusive expression of stewardship. I hope that as I listed the names of all those involved in the workmanship of this renovation and the creation of our prayer room that you all were able to appreciate the size and scope of these projects. The renovation could not have happened without all the years of meticulous training and planning, the generosity and legacy of donors past and present, the lifting and hauling of hymnals and bibles, the back straining work of pulling nails out of the flooring, the hours spent agonizing over the right thickness of cork board, and people like Bob Smith who was here almost every day, jumping in whenever needed. That is what a communal labor of love looks like. And for that, we give thanks.

Today we swing open the doors of our new prayer room, and we hope you will make your way over there following the picnic. It, too, was a labor of love beginning years ago when an anonymous donor gave \$20,000 to the church in hopes it would be put to use for something unique and missional. Through the vision and careful curation of Lisa Koons from the 24/7 prayer room, the labors of the Strategic Vision and Planning team, field trips uptown, donated materials from members, Mack Morgan's Eagle Scout project, and countless hours donated from Carrie Myers, Hunter Morrison, and Susan Smith, a new baby has been birthed. And for that, we give thanks.

We celebrate our relationship with OFCB ministries in Bayonnais, Haiti. As we prepare for another trip in March, we need to celebrate all that God has done in the short time we've known them. Our members sponsor close to 30 children's school tuitions, we've organized and hosted the Church Street Market which raised funds to plaster and paint one of their school buildings, and most recently, through Jock Liles we have developed some relationships with Engineers without Borders to build two bridges in the community. Many of you have heard about our trips and the extremely difficult roads that must be traveled to get to Bayonnais. Through the partnerships with Engineers without Borders and fundraising efforts both in Bayonnais and the US, they have almost met their fundraising goal. And we are just getting started. And for that, we give thanks.

There are many other heroic acts of stewardship that take place across this campus and around Concord. I never knew that churches needed a ministry of cough drops until I met Clemi Hacker, but now I can't imagine a church without one. There are members who have taught not only Sunday School and bibles studies but also shared their gifts of creating terrariums, pottery or teaching a dance class. There are members who send cards, cook meals, and visit those who are homebound. There are members who are pulling together our church picnic even as I speak. There are our Deacons and Presbyterian Women who discern all year around how to financially support non-profits and other worthy projects. I could go on and on.

Friends, stewardship is not just about the yearly pledge card, letter and sermon. Stewardship is about everyone offering who they are in whatever ways they can. It is about intention and generosity. And generosity is contagious. Thomas Jefferson once said, "When any act of charity or of gratitude, for instance, is presented to our sight or

imagination, we are deeply impressed with its beauty and feel a strong desire in ourselves of doing charitable and grateful acts also.”¹ May it be so. I do not feel the least bit uncomfortable or awkward standing up here asking for your time, your gifts and your money, because I know that God is so good. Not a drop is wasted in God’s economy. Rev. Frank Harrington, former pastor of Peachtree Presbyterian in Atlanta, used to say that we should give not until it hurts but until it feels good. And I don’t want you to miss out on that amazing feeling. It is such a gift and a great joy to be given so much love and grace and to have the gifts and the abilities to share that joy with others.

I know it has been hard to say goodbye to Peter Bynum, and we often feel anxiety and uncertainty about what the future might hold. But as a person who has had a bird’s eye view of the continuing work of this community over the last few months, let me assure you that the energy and vitality of this congregation is pressing forward. Our Interim Search Committee is doing amazing work, expedient yet thoughtful work. Our Strategic Planning Implementation team has been meeting and moving forward with many new exciting ideas and projects, and you will hear more about that in the future.

Today is your invitation to invest the resources that God has given you: your energy, your prayers, and yes, your money. The apostle Paul has cast our vision of stewardship: let us give present our bodies, minds and spirits together, as a community of faith, a living sacrifice. And for that, we give thanks. Amen.

¹ Haidt, Jonathan, *The Happiness Hypothesis* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), p. 195.