

Give All You Can
Joel 2:23-32; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14
October 23, 2016
Wauwatosa Avenue United Methodist Church

Today is Stewardship Celebration Sunday. Through the years, I've been told that the only people who hate talking about stewardship more than pastors are congregations. In light of that, I thought I would start with a humorous story to make this all more palatable to everyone. The problem is that, when I began looking for a story, I found two and couldn't make up my mind. That being the case, I figure, if one is good, two must be better, so here goes.

The Sunday School teacher was just finishing a lesson on honesty. "Do you know where little boys go if they don't put their money in the collection plate?" the teacher asked. "Yes ma'am," a boy blurted out, "They go to the movies."

Then there is this one. A torn and ragged one-dollar bill discovered that it was about to be retired from circulation. As it slowly moved along the conveyor belt to the shredder, it became acquainted and struck up a conversation with a one hundred-dollar bill that was meeting the same fate. The hundred began reminiscing about its travels all over the country. Life has been good," the hundred exclaimed. "Why, I've been to Las Vegas, the finest restaurants in New York, political fund raisers, and just returned from a cruise in the Caribbean." "Gee," said the one-dollar bill, "you're fortunate to have been able to visit all those places." So where all have you been in your lifetime, my little friend?" asks the hundred. "Well, I've been to the United Methodist Church, the Baptist Church, the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Lutheran Church, the Catholic Church the Pentecostal Church, the Church of Christ..." "Excuse me," says the hundred, "but what's a church?"

Okay. The second story was a bit more subtle. And, the truth of the matter is, I don't mind talking about stewardship in churches, and I have yet to be tarred and feathered by a congregation for doing so! People understand that there are costs associated with doing church. If you own a home – especially an older home – you realize that there is a cost to maintain a it, to heat it, and to light it. When you compare a single family home to this property, you have to multiply the cost by about 50. We have a wonderful paid staff. Some churches do not have a paid staff or have one much smaller than ours. We could go that route, but to keep up with our current level of ministry, you would really have to step up above and beyond what you currently do here. For example, a volunteer could clean the church. But, remember, when we talk about this building, it is your home times

50. It's a big job that Marie does so well for us. Our Christian Ed program could be totally handled by volunteers. It is currently a fulltime position and Natalie has a Master's degree in order to have the skills needed. You understand what I'm saying. Besides, the good news is that, through the years, you have made the decision to remain in this building and care for it. You have decided to have professional staff to maintain the building and guide us in ministry to one another and the world. You *are* a generous people.

There are challenges to doing ministry in the 21st century. There were challenges to doing ministry in the 1st Christian century. The writer of 2 Timothy writes: "As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race. I have kept the faith." "Poured out like a libation." Picture this as one in the early church would have seen it. The writer compares his life to a chalice filled with wine being slowly poured over the ground. It is a story of exhaustion, but he also compares his life's work to fighting a good fight and running a spectacular race.

Our challenges now have to do with the place of the church in the world. Those of us in the church know there is a great need for us, though we have not always communicated that well. Our own congregation once had over 2000 members, and now we are under 400. When I came to the Wisconsin Conference in 2007 there were 90,282 United Methodists in Wisconsin. As of January 1, 2015, there were 68,087 members in Wisconsin. That is a decline of 22,195, or nearly 25% in 8 years. As the saying goes, "Many hands make light work." Translated for us, "Many givers make for robust giving and ministry." We now have many fewer givers. If anything, the needs are greater than they were back in the golden era of the 1950s and 60s.

Don't worry. There is great hope for us. I want to talk about two gospel stories. The one we just heard from Luke is about the righteous (perhaps we should say self-righteous) Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee enters the temple and loudly declares his own glory rather than the glory of God. "Lord, look at me. I'm pretty darn fantastic. I'm not like *everyone* else. I pray all the time – loudly – especially when there are people around to hear me. I fast twice a week. It's hard but I tell *everybody* what a great thing I'm doing. I give a tenth of everything I get. I give it in large coins so it will make lots of noise going into the collection plate. Look around, God. There is no one as good as me. Why, look. There is one of those filthy, lying, cheating tax collectors. I don't suppose you'll bother to listen to his sorry little prayer." The tax collector, with shoulders bent, stands in the corner facing the wall, kneels down, and quietly whispers, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Jesus told the crowd, "The tax collector's prayer was heard.

The Pharisee's prayer was to himself, not to God. He did not leave forgiven, but the tax collector did."

The other story is about the widow's mite. We know this parable. We only know four things about this woman: first, she *is* a woman; she is a widow; she is poor; she is nameless (at least to us). Jesus is in the Temple and watching how various people gave their offerings or alms for the poor. There were thirteen large, metal, trumpet-shaped vessels that lined the Temple courtyard. Remember, there was no paper money at that time, only coinage. You can imagine that, when a rich person dropped many coins in the metal containers, there was a loud noise. The Greek word used for the two coins, *lepta*, that were dropped by our nameless woman tell us that both the value and size of the coins were small. Jesus said to the disciples who were with him, "I assure you that this poor widow has put in more than everyone who's been putting money in the treasury. All of them are giving out of their spare change. But she from her hopeless poverty has given everything she had, even what she needed to live on." Here is a desperately poor woman giving alms for poor people. Our first thought is that the woman must have been deranged to give all she had. Also, Jesus seems to be working from an odd notion of economy. There are four takeaways here: 1/ It was not the size of the gift, but the impact on the giver that was important; 2/ While the woman's gift didn't have a great impact on the Temple's bottom line, it made a huge difference in the widow's life; 3/ Giving is based not on what people give, but on what is left over afterward; and 4/ The importance isn't on a comparison of gifts, but on the capacity of the giver.

There is another thing that is important. The widow was living in the here and now. She understands that she cannot take anything with her out of this world. Being rich or poor is not a matter of what one has in the bank or property or other assets.

One day, the father of a very wealthy family took his son on a trip to the country with the express purpose of showing him how poor people live. They spent a couple of days and nights on the farm of what would be considered a very poor family. On their return from their trip, the father asked his son, "How was the trip?" "It was great, Dad." "Did you see how poor people live?" the father asked. "Oh yeah," said the son. "So, tell me, what did you learn from the trip?" asked the father. The son answered: "I saw that we have one dog and they had four. We have a pool that reaches to the middle of our garden and they have a creek that has no end. We have imported lanterns in our garden and they have the stars at night. Our patio reaches to the front yard and they have the whole horizon. We have a small piece of land to live on and they have fields that go beyond our sight. We have servants who serve us, but they serve others. We buy our food, but they grow theirs. We have walls around our property to protect us, they have friends to

protect them.” The boy’s father was speechless. Then his son added, “Thanks, Dad, for showing me how poor we are.”

I always love when sermon preparation causes me to read something new or, better yet, to watch a classic movie I’ve never seen. The other night, I watched *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* for the first time. It came out the year I was born. Big Daddy is a character we might describe as a self-made man. As a child, he traveled with his dad who was a hobo. Now, at the end of his life, dying of cancer and trying to fix his broken relationship with his younger son, he says:

“I’m a rich man, Brick, yep, I’m a mighty rich man....Close to ten million in cash an’ blue chip stocks, outside, mind you, of twenty-eight thousand acres of the richest land this side of the valley Nile! But a man can’t buy his life with it...he can’t buy back his life when his life is finished.”

Then a bit later, after Brick has asked him why he allowed Big Mama to buy this whole basement full of junk when they were in Europe. Big Daddy tells him:

The human animal is a beast that dies and if he’s got money he buys and buys and buys and I think the reason he buys everything he can buy is that in the back of his mind he has the crazy hope that one of his purchases will be life everlasting! – Which it never can be...”

We live in the middle of a sea of need. We do not know how to begin to fix the problems of the world, but we know that is, somehow, what God calls us to do both individually and communally. The life of the active Christian is neither easy nor passive. We are called to earn, save, and give. Additionally, we are called to figure out ways to give that will make a difference.

Congregations go through seasons. We are at the beginning of a new season here at Wauwatosa Avenue. I mentioned the decline in the church in Wisconsin. This church is not as large as it once was, but it is healthy and vibrant. We have been given so much. Remember these words from Luke 12:48: “From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required.” I think our congregation is being called, not only to greatness, but to be an example to the United Methodists of Wisconsin of what and who the church is to be in the 21st century. That is my hope. That is my dream. I hope you will join me in making it happen!