

A BOUNTEOUS LIFE

Today, every member of our congregation has the opportunity to make a pledge of financial giving to support the work of Jesus Christ through this church. Pledging your financial support is an act of faith, but it's also a spiritual discipline.

Maybe you're thinking to yourself, "My pledge, my monetary giving to the church is a spiritual discipline? Really?" Yes, it is. Our financial support to this particular Body of Christ is more than just a contribution to the church budget. And stewardship is a lot more than simply giving money.

Let's be honest: money isn't a popular topic of conversation in churches. For many pastors and congregations, the annual stewardship campaign is their least favorite time of year. Some people who otherwise would be in church don't attend worship on Stewardship Sunday. Many preachers make excuses when their sermons contain appeals for money; and few people on the Ministry of Outreach and Stewardship are comfortable calling on pledging stragglers.

In a book of sermons on stewardship, author David Shirey asked a question we all want the answer to: "What gave giving a bad name?" Shirey wondered if it may be something about human nature that makes us hesitate, if not outright refuse, to give our wealth away. Do we human beings have some kind of natural, inborn inclination to keep, to hold onto, and even hoard our material possessions?

Or perhaps it's hard to give because we think we just don't have that much to give. We don't consider our lives to be full of wealth, overflowing with abundance. We have bills to pay and mouths to feed. Let the people with true abundance, who have lots of money to spare, give theirs away.

Or maybe, Shirey wrote, giving got its bad name from all the abuses and misuses that go on in the organizations and churches that are asking for our money.

I personally wonder if, in addition to Shirey's logical reasoning about why people resist doing it, giving got a bad name because it touches an emptiness deep inside of us that we would rather not address. Perhaps requests from the church to give money touch something of a spiritual abyss in us, along with our financial insecurities and worries. Being asked to give exposes something

in us that we lack. Such as, perhaps, a deep and unshakeable faith in God.

In this morning's Scripture reading, Jesus taught about stewardship as a spiritual discipline. A rich man approached Jesus and asked about Eternal Life. Specifically, how could he inherit it? What did he need to do so he could obtain it?

The man already obeyed all the commandments, he followed all the rules, yet he sensed that his life somehow, in some way, wasn't abundant enough. In spite of all the wealth and prosperity he enjoyed in life, something was missing. He lacked something. There must be something else he had to do.

Jesus told him, "Yes, you do lack something. And this is how you can find and experience true abundance in your life. Go and sell everything, give it to the poor, and come, follow me." By doing that, by taking that dramatic trip in his life, the rich man would learn what it was he lacked, and consequentially he would gain abundance. But the poor guy (pun intended) wasn't able, or he wasn't willing to do as Jesus instructed, and he walked away sorrowfully.

What was it the rich man lacked?

He lacked trust. He wasn't able to trust God. He lacked the ability to discern and have faith in the grace that God gives so freely and abundantly. The rich man thought he could earn Eternal Life by doing all the right things. He didn't understand that no one can earn Eternal Life, no matter what they do.

Author and pastor Barbara Brown Taylor described it this way. "We can keep the commandments until we are blue in the face; we can sign our entire paychecks over to our church and rattle tin cups for our supper without earning a place at God's banquet table. The Kingdom of God is not for sale. The poor cannot buy it with poverty, any more than the rich can buy it with their wealth. The Kingdom of God is God's consummate gift, to give to whomever God pleases for whatever reason pleases God."

Jesus offered the rich man a spiritual path that would open his eyes to God and help the man attain what he lacked: "Go, sell, give, and come follow me," Jesus said. For that rich man, financial giving was the path to a different life, a truly abundant life. Giving away his wealth was the path, the trip to bountiful that would open his heart and free his mind to accept God's grace. But the man just couldn't let go of his possessions and place his trust in God. Barbara Brown Taylor explained his refusal this way: "The catch is, you have got to be free to receive God's gift. You cannot accept God's gift if you have no spare hands to take it with. You cannot make room for God's gifts if all your rooms are already full. You cannot follow if you are not free to go."

Stewardship is a spiritual path to a more bountiful life. And we follow Jesus on that journey, not because we're trying to earn something, but because

it will open us to God. It will free us to trust God and appreciate God's gift of grace. Yes, stewardship is a spiritual discipline. Personal financial giving is a spiritual journey; it's a trip to bountiful.

We give to celebrate the Kingdom of God. We give to further the Gospel of Jesus Christ, a gospel that is grounded in divine grace. We give because God made a promise to us, a promise that when we free ourselves from the idolatrous love and covetousness of material wealth, we will have treasure in heaven.

A woman named Verity Jones, publisher and editor at DisciplesWorld, Inc. shared a story about a time when she was in seminary, and she visited a very prominent New England church. It had a big endowment, large staff, huge building, and numerous wealthy members. It was once a flagship mainline Protestant church, well known throughout the country. She wrote:

"I happened to visit on the first day of their annual financial stewardship campaign. The Senior Minister was preaching. He was new to the church, having recently been spirited away from a prominent church in another state.

"The minister began his sermon with an apology to visitors. He said, more or less, that the church only talks about stewardship once a year, and he was sorry that we visitors had been unlucky enough to come on this day to hear him talk about money. But we shouldn't worry; it would be over soon.

"I was stunned," wrote Jones. "In just a few short sentences, this minister of the Gospel had told me that stewardship wasn't important to this wealthy church, that they only talk about it reluctantly, and that the sermon would have no meaning for visitors. I might as well take a nap. I almost got up and left, I was so disgusted. Later I learned that this flagship church was struggling with scandal and internal conflict, and that new minister wasn't there for very long."

I believe that in this church, our church—the First Congregational Church of Scarborough—talking about stewardship is a good thing because stewardship is a spiritual discipline. Stewardship is one of the ways we live together as Christians. Stewardship campaigns ought to be celebrations of all that we can do and want to do in Christ's name when we give of our resources of money, time and talent; and all that we can become when we trust God.

So, let us joyfully talk about stewardship today, tomorrow, and in the years ahead. Let us boldly talk about giving as part of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Every day, let us more and more be a church whose members share their abundance gratefully and with gladness, in response to the abundant blessings God has graciously given. Because stewardship is a spiritual path that can open us to God's grace and love: both of which are free gifts that cost us absolutely nothing, but will take us on a trip that leads to abundant blessings: a trip to bountiful. Amen.