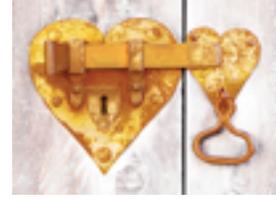




## Treasure

Matthew 6:19-34  
Rev. Dr. Ritva H. Williams  
November 9, 2014  
Consecration Sunday



I was downstairs looking at the photos and newspaper articles about the beginnings of St. Stephen's, thinking how to transfer that material to our new website's history page when a date caught my eye. **October 9, 1949.** The day this congregation dedicated its first church building. That was, like ah... 65 years and one month ago. Sixty-five years ago St. Stephen's Lutheran Church acquired a home in this little white block building. 65 years ago this congregation acquired a physical place — a geographic location — a permanent address. [Is this an anniversary that we should be celebrating? If yes, please contact me and let's organize a party].



Now we all know that the church is not a building, or a steeple or a resting place. We know that the church is all the people. But a church building is important to the people. It is the congregation's home, a fixed, regular place to gather. It is easy to see that the people of St. Stephen's have treasured this place. The original building was first expanded with the addition of a fellowship and office wing. Re-clad in wood siding;



tucked behind lovely porches; fitted with stained glass windows. A second addition created the space in which we worship today.



This clearly is a treasured place, but why?

Over the last six weeks we have heard from Diane Daubenmier (council president), Becky Lahart (children's ministry team leader), Tim Sagers (council vice president), Jackie Lee (financial secretary) and Amy Kuhn (hospitality team leader). They have shared with us how they came to be part of this community of faith, and why they give their time, energy and money to St. Stephen's. Not one of them has said that give because of the building. Their giving is prompted by gratitude for what happens among the people who gather inside this building. They give generously of their time, energy and money because they know first hand what it means to receive a wholehearted welcome when they were strangers, to be welcomed back warmly without questions after they have drifted away, to have companions to walk beside and lean on through difficult times, to have friends who will come to the rescue when disaster strikes.

What I'm hearing from our congregational leaders is that they treasure St. Stephen's because of the people who gather here, and the way we live out our mission in this place. What I'm hearing is that our leaders give out of gratitude for the grace they have received — because they have come to know Christ more deeply in the way the people live and share Christ with each other here, and with others beyond the walls of this place. Our leaders invest their time, energy and money in St. Stephen's so that others here and far away may have a chance to experience Christ's love and grace in the same way they have.

Together with our congregational leaders, John and I are increasing our commitment for 2015, for the following reasons:

- It is the responsible thing to do as members of a congregation.
- We are grateful for the ways we have been blessed through my call to serve here. Our tithe is our way of saying thank you and paying forward the blessings we have received.
- Our tithe works through this church to touch the lives of many, many people, not just members and guests, but also many who will never even set foot in our building.

Responsibility, gratitude, and a desire to make a difference by giving through the church are the big motivators for stewardship in the Williams' household. But there may yet be another reason for giving. Let me share Debbie's story with you.

Debbie volunteered, without the pastors asking, to lead our Stewardship Ministry Team. Here's why. Debbie had been married less than a decade when her husband was killed in an accident. Her happy secure life as a stay-at-home mother of two small children came crashing down. No husband, no job, no income — she ended up on welfare. Grieving, destitute, and deeply ashamed of being on welfare, she committed to give \$5 a week to the church. She did so to remind herself that she was not a welfare mom living off the dole, but a person of worth, a person who had something to give, who could make a positive contribution. Debbie gave \$5 every week for the three years it took to get her life back on track, go back to school, and get a good job so that she could support her sons. Over the years since her giving increased, and by the time she volunteered to lead the Stewardship Team she was a major donor.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus tells us, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). Where we put our treasure, how we put it to use determines what sort of people we become. <sup>1</sup> We know this is true about our physical bodies. We won't become more physically fit unless we get our butts off the couch. To be spiritually fit we need to engage in some spiritual practices — things like regular worship, Bible reading, prayer, and yes, giving. Jesus says, "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also," telling us straight out that what we do with our treasure affects who we are spiritually, and determines what kind of people we will become. That's why Jesus tells a rich man to give his money to the poor (Mark 10:17-22), warns another rich man about the foolishness of building bigger and bigger barns to hold all his possessions (Luke 12:16-21), prompts a greedy tax collector to refund the people he defrauded (Luke 19:1-10), and praises a widow who gives her last penny as a tithe (Mark 2:41-44). Jesus cared about the spiritual health of these persons, and urged them to use their treasure in ways that would help them grow closer to God.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mark Allen Powell, *Giving to God: The Bible's Good News about Living a Generous Life*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), pp.47-62.

“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21). Debbie’s story is a beautiful illustration of Jesus’ words. Her story shows us how giving can become a bond that brings us closer to God and helps us become the kind of people we most want to be. In those early years of her widowhood, Debbie’s \$5 a week donation gave her a sense of positive self-esteem and self-respect. Joined together with the gifts of her brothers and sisters in Christ, Debbie’s gift made possible a whole host of ministries that by herself she could never have accomplished. Giving at church helped make her dream of becoming a successful, self-supporting person come true. Through her giving at church God transformed a welfare mom into a stewardship leader.

On this Consecration Sunday, I want to thank our leaders for sharing their stories, and especially for giving their time, energy and money to support the mission and ministries of St. Stephen’s. I want to thank the 47 households that have already turned in their commitment cards. I want to encourage all of you to step up in faith by turning in a commitment card today (or in the next couple of weeks). Your commitment cards are vital to developing a ministry plan and budget for 2015. The stewardship brochure lifts up our new and expanded ministries, and suggests some directions we would like to go in 2015 if we can secure the necessary funding.

You also need to know that at the end of October we were running a cash flow deficit of just slightly over \$7200. To address that deficit we will be providing you with some special offering opportunities over Thanksgiving and Christmas.

As we prayerfully consider how we will respond to the church’s financial needs, I invite all of us to pay attention to:

- our responsibility as members of St. Stephen’s to take care of our treasure — this place — so that it may continue to function as a center for Christ’s mission for another 65 years.
- our gratitude for the grace and blessings we receive through the various ministries that take place here: music, worship, children’s ministry programs, youth ministry programs, Stephen Ministry, Senior Support Network, Bible studies and so much more.
- the opportunity we get to make a difference beyond these walls through our partnership with St. Luke’s Hospital in training future pastors, our participation in the Family Promise program of providing temporary shelter for homeless families, through our Mission Support for the work of the ELCA, through Global Hunger, and our global mission partnerships with the Kisiwani Lutheran Parish, the Ebenezer Glenn Orphanage in Haiti, and more.

Finally, knowing that how we use our treasure determines what sort of people we become, let each of us ask ourselves: How can I use my treasure — my time, my energy, my money — today to become the person I most want to be, a more spiritually mature person, a more Christ-like person? Amen.