

“The Greatest Commandment”
Matthew 22: 34-46

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One of the blessings in my life is to be surrounded by loving grandparents. Thanks to two generations of divorces and remarriages, I have more grandparents than the average person. Of my three grandfathers, my grandpa Juan was the one that I was closest to growing up since we lived near each other. My Grandpa Juan is from Chile and although his English is good, language can still be a barrier for him in communicating with people around him. Things like jokes often confuse him because he struggles to follow plays on words or translate a quick punch line. But there is one particular joke that he loves. It is a joke that I have heard every single time I have visited him for the last ten years since I first announced I wanted to work in the church.

Without fail, when our family is together he will pull me aside and say, “I have something to tell you. There was a priest, like you, and he collected the offering from all the people in the church. After church he put their money in a basket and he brought it up to the altar. He held out the basket and looked up to Heaven and said, 'God, I will throw this money up to you. Whatever you want, you take for yourself.' Then the priest threw the money in the air, and when it all landed back in the basket the priest said, 'That is all you want? Okay! I guess the rest is for me!’” This joke has become such a routine for us that now he just mimes tossing the basket in the air and says, “Yes, yes?” Every week when we collect the offering I picture my grandpa smiling and laughing in the front pew..

It's just a joke, and I've heard it more times than I care to, but there is a strain of truth that still comes out in it after all this time. We really do struggle with figuring out

which of our money should go to God and which is for ourselves. Or how much money we should donate to causes we care about and how much we should save for our children's college education or for a necessary house repair. Even as a church we often wonder, how much of our budget should go to support outside missions and how much should be allotted to support the onsite mission of the church? We call this practice of deciding or discerning to give away what we have worked for or received *stewardship*. We believe ultimately that everything in this world, including our resources, comes from God and we are just temporary stewards of those resources. So we consider ourselves stewards of money but also of how we give away our time and how we utilize our talent in service to God.

So this is why, for those of you who are newer or are visiting for the first time, why we have a stewardship season in our church that includes Gratitude Sunday. We express our gratitude for all that we have received, whether it is a lot or a little, whether it is a pension or a salary or assistance with our groceries and bills. There are some of us who have gratitude that we are able to give away the resources that we have access to this year and some of us that are grateful others give so that we might receive the resources that we need. Still others express gratitude for being able to offer our time to worthwhile projects and ministries. Whether we are giving or receiving, we see ourselves as stewards, caretakers of God's abundant resources in this world.

The practice of stewardship is as ancient as the Church and as important a season as Advent or Lent. It is a part of the Christian life but it is probably one of the least glamorous seasons of the year. It requires self-reflection and prayer for individuals and

families. It takes communication and dialogue about what the church's needs are and what the wider community's needs are.

It takes honesty for a church to say, 'This is what it is going to take to continue doing ministry together next year. This is what it will take to grow our current ministries.' It takes courages for individuals and families to say, "This is how I want to contribute to those ministries. This is how we plan to use our personal resources in the coming year." We often say that stewardship is a practice—it is a practice of prayer and trust that we are making faithful, careful decisions. It is a practice of generosity that in those moments when we are blessed with an abundance of resources we can generously give to others—whether that is food on our shelves that we can donate to the local pantry, or household items that we send with Hawkwing to the Lakota Sioux Reservation, or funds that we donate to support the youth and children in our community.

Like any practice, it can be frustrating or tiring. Or we can misunderstand it or take it for granted. There might be years when someone mentions stewardship in the church and it lights a sparks in your eyes. There might be other years when, for any number of good reasons, we would rather skip ahead to the next season. Last week at our UCC Connecticut Conference's Annual Meeting, you could tell there was some burnout on discussing stewardship, church giving and the Conference's budget for the coming year. For every other item on our agenda, there was a palpable energy in the room. People were generous with their applause, people contributed to the discussion and dialogue and even waited at microphones to get a turn to speak.

When it came time to talking about money, the enthusiasm was dampened. There was no interaction. We quickly and quietly voted, hoping to get this part over fast. We

passed a budget without any fanfare or celebration. If you took that moment as a time to catch up with emails on your phone, which many of us were, you probably missed it altogether.

At the end of the night, the guest theological reflector for the meeting, Rev. Mary Luti, pointed out this lack of enthusiasm and excitement over talking about the Conference's budget. She reminded us that the work of budgeting and stewardship is sacred work. Sacred means that it is work that is from God and it is work for God. Sacred means that in doing it, in balancing the numbers and in making decisions and in giving as we are able, we are connecting ourselves to something holy.

Rev. Luti reminded us, “After all, someone had to repair the straps on Jesus' sandals so that he could walk to dinner at Mary and Martha's house. Someone had to the caulk the boat so that Jesus and the disciples could travel along the Sea of Galilee without sinking.” There is a lot of work that we would rather not have to do, but it is necessary in order to sustain and build our ministry together.

I have carried those images with me this entire week. Can you imagine being the person tasked with repairing Jesus' sandals? Entrusted to make them strong and sturdy so that he may be safe and walk with ease and comfort? To be allowed to be that close to him and to serve him in that way?

When I think about the Greatest Commandment, to love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, I can't stop thinking about that person who repaired the straps on Jesus' sandals, the person who made sure his boat stayed afloat, the person who gave him the plate of bread and the cup of wine that he ate and drank from

during his last meal. Through their stewardship of their time and talent and resources, they demonstrated their love of Jesus with all their hearts and souls and minds.

Our work of stewardship continues to be Greatest Commandment work. I am thinking of the deacon who comes on Saturday morning to prepare the sanctuary, the person who brews the coffee so that we might be nourished after worship, the trustee who faithfully and steadfastly turns out all the lights and locks up the building, the sexton who makes the windows shine. The person who keeps our budget balanced and the person who deposits our offering at the bank.

The person who delivers bread from bakeries to those who are hungry, the person who drives their neighbor to doctors appointments and on errands, the person who goes to Hartford each week to teach a child to read. This is what I call Greatest Commandment work—it is what it looks like to love God and your neighbor with all your heart and soul and mind.

There are days when being a steward and practicing stewardship indeed feels like work. But there are days when it feels like a privilege to be able to do this work, days when it feels like a blessing to be able to serve God. Days when we are full of gratitude to be a steward of creation, of this beautiful world that God made. Today is gratitude Sunday for all of the stewards and caretakers of the resources and ministries of God's world, gratitude for the work we are able to do and gratitude for others who have done the work before us and alongside us. Everyday, but especially today on Gratitude Sunday, I am full of gratitude for each of you. I am full of gratitude for this work that we do together to serve God. Amen!