

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Defining Who We Are”

October 31, 2010

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Matthew 6:19-21

19 *‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

Mark 12:41-44

41 *He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴²A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³Then he called his disciples and said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴⁴For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.’*

Luke 18:18-25

18 *A certain ruler asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ ¹⁹Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ²⁰You know the commandments: “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honour your father and mother.”’ ²¹He replied, ‘I have kept all these since my youth.’ ²²When Jesus heard this, he said to him, ‘There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ ²³But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. ²⁴Jesus looked at him and said, ‘How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’*

L. R. Kalajainen tells the story of a very wealthy man who was asked if he would share his own testimony in worship about why he believed in stewardship. He agreed, and when he stood up in front of the congregation he said, “You all know me to be a man of great wealth. And it’s true. I’m a millionaire. But I want to say that I attribute it all to God’s blessings. I remember as a young boy, I had just earned my first dollar for feeding my neighbors’ dog while they were on vacation. I went to church and there was a missionary speaking. He challenged us to give sacrificially to the work of missions, and since I only had one dollar, I knew that I either had to give all of it to God or none of

it. So at that moment, I made a decision. I decided to give my whole dollar, the first money I'd ever earned, all that I had, to God. I believe God blessed that decision and that is why I'm a millionaire today.

The gentleman made his way back to his seat and there was a sort of awed silence in the room at the power of his testimony. But just as he was sitting down, a little old lady sitting in the same pew, leaned over to the man, and in a loud whisper that could be heard throughout the entire sanctuary said, "I dare you to do it again!"

I want to thank all of you who attended one of the three Stewardship Classes that we held during the past couple of weeks. The lesson I tried to present was perhaps an obvious one, but I think a very powerful one. We are stewards of that which we possess. We don't really own these possessions, we manage them as a good steward, hopefully in a way that pleases, honors, and serves our God. We need to give of our time and treasure and talent to God. We are called to give, however not because it is our duty or obligation to give as a member of the church. We are called to give, however not because the church is in great need of our dollars and time commitment. Both of those things may be very true. But the institutional needs of the church should not be the focus of our stewardship if stewardship is to be an act of a growing faith. Instead Christian Stewardship places our relationship with God at the center. The church is merely the means to serve God and reach toward the purpose of stewardship. Proper stewardship is recognizing the gifts that God has provided, seeking a place to use those gifts in God's service, and then offering those gifts in gratitude to God.

I also spoke about the concept of tithing, the Hebrew and Biblical tradition of returning 10 percent of your earnings to the service of God. The origin of tithing was not centered on an exact percentage but more in the giving of a gift that was large enough and important enough to indicate that you had taken a risk in giving, trusting that God would ultimately provide. I reminded everyone about how tithing really meant that our gifts to God should be sacrificial, priority changing, a statement about who we really are and what we think is really important.

There is an old and perhaps overused statement, "You are what you eat." Married to a registered dietitian I know that it true and sometimes I think about it when I shove a hot dog or nachos or a piece of pie into my mouth. Today I would like to amend those words and remind us all that indeed, "You are what you give." Our faith is undeniably linked to our finances. Our identity is tied to how we use our treasure. Jesus said in one of the lessons that we read this morning, "Where our treasure is, so will be our heart." How we use what we value, and how we give what we value, says a great deal about who we really are.

It is a frightening thing to be talking about stewardship, this day, at Meadowbrook Congregational Church. Perhaps this fall's stewardship campaign and next week's Consecration Sunday will be one of the most significant events in the history of this church. You might say, "Oh, he's only been around a couple of years. We've been through all this before." But these times are different and I believe the choices we make are most critical to our future.

No one needs to be reminded of the difficult economic times in which we live. The Great Recession's effects have trickled down to each and every household. It is hard to be certain about any financial commitment. For the past two years we have been unable to give our boards any funding for their ministry activities. As of September

30, our pledges were running behind our planned revenue to meet our budget. If this continues we will have to make some tough decisions at the end of the year. It does appear rather bleak when even a bare bones budget is next to impossible to meet.

The nature of our times and our balance sheet has forced us to concentrate upon survival options. Our time and attention has been on fundraising and budget concerns. We are stuck debating issues of money and operating fund support instead of dreaming and acting upon new ways of ministry. I don't believe that any one of us wants this to be the future of Meadowbrook Congregational Church. Institutional preservation is not an attractive activity to entice new members and new ministries.

This morning's Scripture lessons describe two people at moments of decision about giving. Jesus spots a widow in the temple treasury. There are all sorts of wealthy people there making substantial gifts. But this poor woman is debating whether or not to drop all that she has- two copper coins, in the offering. Ultimately she is moved by her dependence upon God and her need to contribute out of her sense of abundance. Then there is the story of the rich young ruler who comes to Jesus seeking advice on how to inherit eternal life. He has obeyed all the commandments and has lived a good life. Yet Jesus tells him he must do one more thing. He must sell all he has and contribute the money to the poor. The young man walks away sadly. He cannot take the risk. He is still dependent upon worldly things and values his life through what he has accumulated. His identity is tied to his treasure and he cannot lose what it is that defines him.

I am reminded of an old Calvin and Hobbes comic strip. Calvin turns to his friend Hobbes and says, "I feel bad that I called Susie names and hurt her feelings. I am sorry I did that." Hobbes replies, "Maybe you should apologize to her." Calvin considers that action for a moment and then responds, "I keep hoping there's a less obvious solution."

The rich young man was there with Calvin. I certainly think that we are in that same position also. Today we know the circumstances of our church. Today we understand the reality of what stewardship demands of us. Yet when it comes to financially undergirding the vision and dreams of excellence for this church, when it comes to generous, sacrificial giving that is indeed a risk of faith- we might find ourselves hoping for a less obvious solution.

This week all of us will reflect upon our individual response to God's call upon our time and talent and treasure. In the weeks ahead, as a worshipping community we must reflect and consider how our church will continue to be faithful to our call to be God's presence in this place here and now. As individuals and as a gathered community of Christ we must understand circumstances and demands, risk and faith. Like the woman in the temple treasury and like the rich young man, we must decide how much we are willing to risk following Jesus' demand upon that which we are stewards.

Billionaire Bill Gates is leading a group of the richest men in the world as they contemplate the meaning of giving their fortune away to accomplish many great purposes. It certainly would be nice if Mr. Gates had some sort of relationship with Meadowbrook Congregational Church. Perhaps somebody can work on that! But I recall reading that several years ago, Ted Turner, another billionaire decided to give one billion dollars to the United Nations. We could all debate the wisdom of giving such a large amount to the United Nations but that isn't the point. The point is the risk

involved in giving such a gift. Turner gave some interviews discussing his gift, talking about what a tough decision it was for him. He said that when he sat down to sign the paper work and to write the check that he was breathing heavily and his pulse was racing. It seemed like such a large risk that he almost changed his mind.

William Willimon, a pastor within the United Methodist Church, writes that one of his least favorite activities of ministry is the fall stewardship campaign. Looking back on his anxiety, he has come to the conclusion that he feared stewardship campaigns because he knew that they were an accurate barometer of his spiritual health and of the spiritual health of the church he served. The decision involved stewardship was like looking into a mirror of the soul. Stewardship defined how much risk he and his congregation were willing to place in their faith and in the demand of Jesus to minister to one another and to their community.

It is risky, giving what we have worked so hard to accumulate. We take a chance when we make a decision to be generous. We must rely upon faith. And this is the true lesson of Christian stewardship. Whose treasure are we actually giving to God? On what should we ultimately depend? We may not be placed in the crucial moment of the widow in the temple treasury, or we may not be moved to ask the question as directly as the rich young ruler, but the stewardship question confronts us all. What we give to God defines who we are.