

## LET IT FLOW

A few years back, while perusing the religion pages of the Saturday newspaper, I came across an advertisement for a church in New Jersey announcing an upcoming service. “A Celebration of Christian Ministry,” read the ad. “Instrumental and Vocal Music; Refreshments and Fellowship.” And then, in case good tunes, good eats and good company weren’t enough of a draw, the ad also proclaimed, in italicized print: “*No Collections EVER!*”

I’m not sure how they went about funding their work. Maybe they used the same approach I once saw in a Kudzu cartoon. In it a smiling preacher stands outside his church building. Right beside a stained glass window is a sign that reads “24-hour donations” and below the sign, mounted in the wall, is an ATM.

I attended a worship service a while back at a small country church where they didn’t have an ATM, but they also avoided taking up collections. At the beginning of the liturgy the pastor pointed out two offering plates placed near the entryway into the sanctuary. “We don’t take up an offering anymore during worship,” he said, “It interrupts the flow of the service.”

I suppose for some folks the passing of plates, the pulling envelopes and money out of pockets and purses and pausing to pray over them, interrupts the flow of worship. But I would like to suggest that rather than interrupting the flow of the service, the offering portion of our service represents the flow of life itself. For we Christians are not called to simply receive the good things of life, we are also called to give.

Writers Kirk Nowery and Dave Sutherland are right on the money, so to speak, when they note: “[Christians] are channels, not containers. God’s love and grace are to flow through us, not be held in us. As stewards, our compelling desire must be to constantly give and give and give as the river of God’s blessing courses through our lives.” (*Stewardship Strategies*, Fall 2005, 9)

Or, as we read in our passage from First Peter, we are to be “good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” (4:10) A good steward is one who manages well that which she or he has been given. We are to be good stewards of God’s grace.

There can be little question that God’s grace; God’s blessing has coursed through most of our lives. There can be little question that most of us have been greatly blessed. We live in the richest county in the richest state in one of the richest nations on the planet. Most of us don’t think twice about spending large sums of money on things most of the world considers luxuries. Just take a look at the cars parked out

back, or, for that matter, in my driveway! And most of us simply take for granted the basics like food, shelter and clothing.

And while it is true that we work long hard hours, it is difficult to argue that any of us work any harder than the single parent holding down two jobs at minimum wage just to make ends meet. We like to think we have the many things we have because we've earned them. And to some extent that may be true. But we didn't earn being born in America. We didn't earn the opportunity for a good education. We didn't earn many of the privileges we enjoy. It is by sheer luck or happenstance, or perhaps grace, that we have what we have. But, as Jesus once said, "from the one who has much, much is expected." (Luke 12:48) We have an abundance of grace, but it is given to be shared, not hoarded. We are called to use it for the betterment of others and of our world. We are called to be good stewards of God's grace. We are called to let it flow.

Tom White understands that. He's the Boston businessman who built Foxboro Stadium, the home of the New England Patriots.

Over the years White amassed a fortune worth over seventy-five million dollars. And he has decided to give it all away. "I can't take it with me," he told a reporter for the *Boston Globe*. "I'm motivated a lot by what Jesus wants me to do and I think he wants me to help make the world a better place."

His greatest sense of achievement comes not from his high profile work on the boards of Harvard Divinity School, Boston College or the Kennedy Presidential Library, but rather from his work in Haiti providing healthcare for the poorest of the poor.

Tom White is a materially wealthy man who understands the basic stewardship principle embodied in our passage from First Peter. Let it flow.

He has, incidentally, just one regret. "I'm sorry," he says, "I don't have more money to give away." (*Boston Globe*, 3-23-04)

You don't have to be a multi-millionaire, though, to be a good steward of God's grace.

Another Tom, Tom Cannon, died just this year of colon cancer at the age of 79. Cannon grew up in a three-room shack without running water or electricity. As an adult he worked for the post office, and never earned more than \$25,000 a year. He lived in a house without central heat, air conditioning or a telephone. On purpose. You see, living so frugally left him more money to give away. Often handing out \$1000 checks, he frequently helped those who were in turn helping others: a struggling volunteer at a local elementary school, a youth worker who could barely afford his rent. Over the course of his lifetime, his gifts amounted to \$156,000.

**Tom Cannon, like Tom White, understood what he had he had been given to him was given so that he might help others. He too, let it flow.**

**Researchers John and Sylvia Ronsvalle estimate that \$70-80 billion dollars a year could provide for the major needs of the poor around the world: clean water, nutritious food, basic education, immunizations. \$70-80 billion a year, properly managed, would eliminate poverty around the globe.**

**On their website, the Ronsvalle's write: "The figure of \$70-80 billion may sound like anything but good news. God may be generous, we agree, but has [God] been that generous?" But, they write, "Consider this: If church members in the United States would increase their giving to 10 percent of their income there could be an additional \$86 billion [for such work.]" ([www.emptytomb.com](http://www.emptytomb.com))**

**Imagine, Christians in this country alone, could eliminate world wide poverty. Just by 10% of our income to the task. We have the resources. As a speaker at a meeting I recently attended said, "The good news friends is that we have the money to do it. The better news is that it's in our pockets!"**

**But that's a real pipe dream, you might be saying. OK, then let's bring it closer to home. Here at Saugatuck we help provide hope and healing for folks in our own community and around the world. Our building is used by groups that address the needs of the hungry, the abused, the homeless, the tortured and tormented. We house close to fifty twelve-step groups that bring about transformed lives. We educate the young so that they might grow up to be giving people. We feed hundreds not only at our Christmas and Thanksgiving Feasts, but also throughout the year as we work with the Gillespie center, Bridgeport Rescue Mission, CCA and the Emergency Shelter in Norwalk. In partnership with Habitat for Humanity, we are providing homes for those who need shelter. Working though Church World Service and our denominational ministries we are helping impoverished persons in places like Pakistan and New Orleans. To do all that, and much more, we rely on the pledges of our members.**

**Next year our Board of Trustees estimates that we will be looking at a minimum increase in our expense of about 10%. Insurance costs will jump 50% in the coming year. Heating oil is up by about 40%. Our building is old, and our efforts to preserve it need to be funded at greater levels than in the past. Our hard working staff deserves to have wages that keep pace with inflation.**

**In addition to all that, the various outreach and mission programs that we support face similar issues. It costs more this year than last to house someone who is homeless, to feed someone who is hungry, to counsel someone dealing with domestic abuse, to relocate a displaced flood or earthquake victim.**

**To continue working at our current level, and to increase our giving to mission agencies, we will need to raise at least 10% more in pledges than we did for 2005. If**

every one who pledged last year raised his or her own commitment by at least 10% (more if you can afford to) we would be set. If you have never pledged before, this is the year. If each and every one of us does our part, we will be able to continue our work unimpeded as we as a congregation contribute to the effort to make this world better.

Some wise soul once observed that there are two major bodies of water in the Holy Land. To the south is the Dead Sea. Located at the southernmost end of Israel, the Dead Sea is about ten miles wide by fifty miles long. Water flows into the Dead Sea from the Jordan and Yarmuk Rivers, but it has no outflow. Water comes in, but it doesn't go out. The Dead Sea takes and takes, but never gives. As a result, the still water sits in the desert heat and evaporates from the Dead Sea leaving behind heavy minerals and salts. In fact the level of salt concentration is about 33%--ten times that of the world's oceans. There is no life in the Dead Sea. It is a liquid wasteland.

The other major body lies to the north, the Sea of Galilee. It is actually a lake, about eight miles wide by twelve miles long. Water flows into Galilee from underground springs and small brooks and it flows out via the Jordan River. The Sea of Galilee is a rich and lively body of water, full of fish which support many who ply its waters. And the Jordan River which flows from it gives life to the desert areas through which it passes. It creates a literal swath of green down the center of Israel.

Water only flows into the Dead Sea, not out. It is, as its name suggests, dead. On the other hand, water flows in and out of the Sea of Galilee. It is teeming with life.

Like a body of water we can take and take and take. We can be filled over and over again. Like the Dead Sea we can hold it all in and keep it to ourselves. But we know where that leads: nowhere. Or, like the Sea of Galilee, we can allow God's grace to flow through us, bringing life not only to ourselves, but also to those whose lives we touch.

You can view collections and pledges as interruptions of the flow of worship, as interruptions in your spiritual journey. Or you can view them as symbols of the flow of life at its best, grace flowing in, and grace flowing out. It is your choice, of course, even as it is mine. Linda and I have already decided to raise our pledge by 10% this year. So have Susanna and Michael.

Brothers and sisters, you and I are called to be good stewards of God's grace. For the river of God's blessing surely courses through our lives. The question is will you let it flow, or not?

It is, in the end, your choice.

Amen  
John H. Danner