

WHOLE HEARTED STEWARDSHIP

There's a story told of an elderly woman whose sole love in life was her pet dog Jasper. Well, Jasper dies, and she wants to do right by him, so she goes to Rev. Brown, the Congregational pastor in town, and asks him to conduct a funeral for Jasper. The minister has some real theological qualms about doing such a thing, and tells her he just can't do it. "But," he says, "Maybe Rev. Smith down at the Presbyterian Church will do it."

So she goes to see Rev. Smith, who also says no, and then the Methodist pastor and even the local Catholic priest. But every one of them says no.

The next day she calls the Congregational pastor back up on the phone, and tells him her dilemma. "I'm so upset," she says, "I just wanted Jasper to have a decent burial. I was even going to give the church that had his funeral ten thousand dollars."

"Well," says Rev. Brown, "Why didn't you tell me Jasper was a Congregationalist!"

There are folks who think we pastors will do anything to raise a buck for the church. And, I suppose there are some who will. And while I would bury your pet cat or dog, free of charge, by the way, I'm not one of them. That said, I do think it important for me to occasionally speak frankly from the pulpit about the church's need for money. We can call it "treasure"—as in "time talent and treasure"—or financial resources, if those make you more comfortable, but to paraphrase Gertrude Stein, "Money is money is money." And to operate, the church needs it.

For the last few weeks the Stewardship Committee has done a fine job of helping us focus on the importance of pledging, our primary source of income. The committee has lined up speakers who've spoken about why they are a part of Saugatuck and why they give. They have sent us informative letters. They facilitated our discussions last Sunday, and will present more information today after worship. They've even provided nifty buttons with provocative slogans and witty reminders. And, of course, they've sent each one of us who are members of the church pledge cards. But now it's time for me to address the matter in what we clergy affectionately call the Annual Stewardship Sermon.

Now, obviously, I hope you will pledge—and I hope you will be generous in your giving. The upkeep of our facilities, the continued work of our staff, the operation of our various programs and our outreach to the needy in this community and around the world, all require solid financial support. As do our hopes and dreams for the future. Yes, I hope you will pledge. But more importantly, I hope you will be a whole hearted steward.

Our scripture reading this morning comes once again from Mark. One of the scribes, the legal experts of that day, has been listening to Jesus, and is impressed by what he has heard. So he decides to seek his opinion about the commandments of God. “What’s the most important of the laws?” he asks. And Jesus replies by reciting the *shema*, that ancient Jewish law that commands total devotion to God: “Love God with your whole heart, mind, soul and strength,” says Jesus. And then he says, “And love your neighbor as yourself.”

One scholar tells us that this summary of the Jewish law contains, and I quote, “three key elements in Christian faith: a) belief in one God, b) whole hearted devotion to God, and c) love of neighbor.” (Pheme Perkins, *New Interpreter’s Bible*, VIII: 679)

Belief in one God is pretty straightforward. And while we have difficulty doing it at times, love of neighbor is also fairly easy to grasp. But whole-hearted devotion? What does that mean? And how does one do it?

By being a whole hearted steward.

You see, you and I are called to love the Holy One with every fiber of our being. We are called to be unreserved in our commitment to God. We are asked to treat everything we have as if it belonged to God. Everything. We are, in the end, called to dedicate our very lives to serving God.

But, you ask, what about my family? What about my job? What about my other obligations?

St. Augustine summed it up in this way: “Love God,” he said, “and do as you please.”

At first glance that sounds like we can do anything we want. But when you place God first, when you truly love God, the things you want to do *are* the very things that please God. What pleases you IS what pleases God.

Now scriptures and tradition make it clear that God wants us to take care of our families. After all, one of the top ten commandments is “Honor your father and mother.” And many scriptures urge parents to tend to the needs of their children.

And scriptures also encourage us to be diligent in our work—to be honest, conscientious and so on.

And scriptures are very clear about the obligation to help our neighbors as they have needs.

These are all things God wants us to do. So dedicating our lives to serving God doesn't mean leaving the world behind and joining a monastery. It doesn't necessarily mean becoming a pastor or a missionary. But it does mean serving the world. Which, for most of us, is right in our own backyards, right in our own homes, and schools and office buildings.

That's why Jesus couples whole hearted devotion to God with love of neighbor. They go together, hand in glove.

But what has that got to do with making a pledge? What has that got to do with giving your time, your talent and your money to the church? Just this.

First, the church is one very effective way to show love for your neighbor. Your financial support makes it possible for Susanna and I to be in the hospital rooms of folks you know and love in their darkest hours; it makes possible our being present for funerals and meetings and worship and so much more. Your pledge dollars make it possible for our musicians to lead you and your neighbors in worshipping God. Your gifts give us the tools to educate the young, they help pay for Abby's work, and supplies and curriculum. Your dollars pay for the work of our support staff, for David and Marcia and Marta and Luis, as they clean rooms and fix broken toilets and type bulletins and balance the books. Your dollars keep this building heated and in good repair. Your pledge dollars make it possible for us to open up our building to the community and welcome folks in recovery in over fifty twelve-step meetings a week. Your financial support helps us give home to the Nursery School and countless other community organizations. And your pledges help us in our efforts to feed the hungry and provide shelter for the poor. Your pledge is an excellent investment in this institution, Saugatuck Congregational Church, which over the last 174 years has demonstrated its ability to show love of neighbor in very tangible ways.

Second, pledging part of your financial resources to the church, as well as part of your time and talent, is a potent symbol. It is a reminder for you that God is to be the focus of your whole life. This place, this people, Saugatuck Church, is all about love of God and neighbor. Your commitment to the church says, "So am I."

Recently Barbara Van Orden lent me a copy of a booklet that was put together in 1997 for the 165th Anniversary of the church. It is a collection of brief essays written by parishioners recounting their memories of Saugatuck.

One of the memories that runs through several of the essays revolves around an annual event that used to be held here at Saugatuck to raise funds to support outreach efforts. It was called the Missionary Roast, and it was held on Memorial Day.

Marj and Ed Potter in their essay described it this way: “Behind the church were the spits, turned by volunteers, on whom sides of beef were roasted for 24 hours. A new mop was used to baste the roasting meat.”

Another member, Helen Waltz, who moved to California a few years back, added this: “While the men attended to the all-night-long barbeque . . . the women prepared the accompaniments for the feast. Most . . . had their specialties: vegetables, salads, etc. Mine was peeling quantities of potatoes the old-fashioned way—by hand. But with joking, storytelling and camaraderie, who wants to count potatoes? I’d do it again today!”

When we are whole hearted stewards, like Helen Waltz, we don’t stop to count potatoes; we forge ahead and keep peeling! We do what needs to be done so that folks can be fed—spiritually, physically and emotionally as well. Knowing we are surrounded by others who will share their stories and their lives with us, we are empowered to give our all. We do it out of love for God, and as an expression of that love. We must become whole hearted stewards.

I realize some will see this sermon as somewhat hard sell. But if we are to realize the dreams God has granted us for more mission giving, a richer youth program and a better effort at letting the community know who we are, we must be willing to peel potatoes. We must be willing to step up and pledge. We must be willing to build on our proud heritage as a church that serves God and neighbor.

Mark Twain is said to have told about a time he went to church. “I once heard a preacher,” he said, “who was powerful good. I decided to give him every cent I had with me. But he kept at it too long. Ten minutes later I decided to keep the bills and give him the change. Another ten minutes and I was darned if I’d give him anything at all. When he finally stopped and the place came around I was so exhausted I [took out] two dollars . . . in sheer spite.” (Quoted by Lowell Streiker, *An Encyclopedia of Humo*, 35-36)

Well, hopefully, I’m a bit smarted that than preacher. And I am about to bring this sermon to a close, but not without one more story from that book of memories.

As most of you know, this meetinghouse used to be on the other side of Post Road. But in the late forties it became clear that in order to expand our abilities to serve the community and educate our children in the faith, we would need a larger facility.

We owned the land we now sit on, and so the bold idea was advanced to move the whole meetinghouse across the road and then add an addition for the church school.

In true congregational fashion, it was hotly debated. Betty Jennings, in her essay in that booklet, writes: “[O]ne woman in particular . . . stood and read from several

pages of notes all the reasons she felt the church should not be moved. She spoke passionately for a full 10 to 15 minutes. . . .

After lengthy and numerous statements against the proposal, a gentle, white haired lady stood at the back of the meetinghouse. I don't believe she had intended to speak at all but, without notes, she spoke . . . calmly about what she felt important for a church "A church must grow," [she said], "it must not stand still. It must change with the times."

As we approach our 175th Anniversary, we are faced with the same challenge. We must grow, we must not stand still. We must change with the times, while continuing to honor the past. But to do so we will all need to expand our commitment to the work of Saugatuck.

As Christians we are called to be whole hearted in our devotion to God. And one of the ways we can express that devotion is in and through our support of this church.

Our future depends on each one of us. It is in your hands—and in your hearts.

The decisions now rest with you.

So let's go peel potatoes.

**Amen
John H. Danner**