



UNDER CONSTRUCTION

Sermon preached by the Reverend Carol Cole Flanagan on the Twenty Second Sunday after Pentecost, October 28, 2007, at Christ Church, Detroit. RCL Readings: Joel 2:23-32; Psalm 65; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; and Luke 18:9-14.

My first memory of the church is of the first day of Sunday School when I was 4 going on 5. On that day, my teacher said that because we were old enough to be in Sunday School, we were old enough to have envelopes, and she distributed little boxes. Mine were pink. She said these were for our offering, to thank God for all that God has given us. Each of us had an important part to play in the ministry of the church, and that the money we put in our envelopes was for the glory of God, and would be used for the work of the church, and to care for those in need. She said to talk with our parents, and decide together what our offering would be.

Each week, when she took attendance, the teacher would collect our envelopes and check off that we had returned them, and when we were *absent*, we would bring *two* envelopes the following week, and she would check them off in her book. Every Sunday during those years, the Sunday School Superintendent would stop by our classroom to collect our envelopes, and two children would be chosen to present the Sunday School offering during the service.

I was very excited, and felt very grown-up. To have my very own box of envelopes felt like a solemn duty and obligation, and I was very proud to be entrusted with such an adult responsibility. During the drive home I told my parents about my envelopes. My father, to his great credit, promptly said that if I was old enough to have envelopes, I was old enough to have an allowance, and that he would provide me with 10 cents a week – 5 cents for my envelope and 5 cents for my piggy bank. And so he did. Every Saturday morning he would deposit two nickels on the mantel over the fireplace, and I would put one in the envelope and one in the bank.

During Lent, we had mite boxes for the Church School Missionary Offering. Some of you are old enough to remember them. I loved finding ways to earn a few coins for my mite box. I loved making gifts for parents and grandparents. I spent hours with oilcloth and pinking shears cutting out placemats, or covering little match boxes with black felt, and little cutouts of diamonds, hearts, clubs, and spades for bridge-playing grandparents. Then came the first gifts I purchased with my very own money – a major event. They came from a church bazaar at the Congregational Church. I was in 3rd grade and went with several friends from the choir – an exhilarating experience that left a lasting impression.

Then there was an encounter with abundance – in upper case letters. I received in the mail an enormous surprise box with a note from my uncle's new fiancée. She wrote she was cleaning out closets, and thought I might like to have some things to play dress-up, and inside were half a dozen

evening gowns, crinoline petticoats, high-heeled shoes, beaded evening bags, gloves, shawls and bangles. There are no words to describe the glee with which that box was received. It was unexpected and lavish, and it kept an entire neighborhood of little girls happily occupied for an entire summer!

My parents spoke a lot about giving, about donations to churches and charitable institutions when someone died, and about the Community Chest – the forerunner to today’s United Way. I continued to give until I left for college, and when I came home and got my first job, I called the parish office and asked for envelopes. These are things for which I can take little credit. They’re important because they reflect the discipline that was part of my upbringing. The credit goes to a parish and a family that thought giving was important to my spiritual formation and reinforced it throughout my childhood. It was a discipline of learning gratitude.

Then after seminary I interviewed with a parish in Rochester, New York, and met with the bishop who told me stewardship was their first priority. It was expected that every priest in the Diocese would tithe and give leadership to tithing in the parishes they served. If I was already tithing, great. If not, I was to develop a plan to reach the tithe within three years. He concluded the conversation by saying that if I was comfortable with that he would be delighted to have me in the diocese, and if I wasn’t, then I really didn’t want to be there. I doubt anyone ever accused him of being subtle.

So I went to Rochester and began work on a three year plan. I began with all of the same questions that all of us seem to ask at some point or another. First, are we talking net or gross income? I had a pit in my stomach and visions of living on Campbell’s soup, and peanut butter sandwiches while dodging creditors. I began by deciding that I would *start* with net income, and review in three years time because I had to start *somewhere*. I was giving approximately 4% a year, so I would need to increase my giving by 2% a year each year for three years.

Then I wrestled with whether the entire amount was to go to the church, or whether this included other forms of religious and charitable giving. To make a long story short, at the end of three years, I was giving 7% of my net income to the church, and 3% to other ministries. By that time, I had discovered we had not starved, all the bills had gotten paid, and it was fun – not at all what I expected.

I thought if I could do this in three years time, the next step was to tithe my gross income. From then on, I adopted the discipline of increasing my pledge every year. I did that because one of the worst things you can do to your church is to give the same that you gave last year. If there is one thing you can be sure of it’s that the mission and ministry of the church are *not* going to cost what they did last year, let alone grow, develop and flourish.

Years ago I heard theologian John Westerhoff say, “We act our way into new ways of thinking. We don’t think our way into new ways of acting.” Jesus says, “Where your treasure is there will your heart be also.” He doesn’t say where your heart is there will your treasure be.” The heart follows the wallet. We act our way into new ways of thinking.

Increasing my giving has deepened my relationship with God and others. Giving is no longer a matter of obligation but liberation ... a sharing in the self-emptying life of Christ. If you want to deepen your faith increase your giving. Faith is more often the opposite of anxiety, than doubt. Deepening one’s faith involves taking a risk, and trusting God. Whatever anxiety, fear, guilt, resentment and apprehension I felt beforehand at the prospect of increasing my giving, disappeared.

Now, when my giving is the first check I write, there is always enough left for everything else. Amazing – but there it is.

At the last meeting the vestry approved a resolution offered by Lamar Richardson that going forward, each time we approve our pledge to the diocese, we round it up. We have routinely paid our fair share, but there is nothing that says we have to give the *least* the law requires. Rounding up is a first step toward a more generous response. It helps us to act our way into new ways of thinking.

The vestry also approved a request that we dedicate 0.7% to the work of the Millennium Development Goals. This is a great opportunity for spiritual transformation -- ours and the worlds... we do this work because every person bears God's image, and the God who emptied the divine self into human form calls us into a similar existence ... to give ourselves for the life of the world.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman writes in *Christian Century* (March 24-31, 1999). "... the central problem of our lives is that we are torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of God's abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity — a belief that makes us greedy, mean and unneighborly."

My pledge is just a small part of what it means to be a steward. I am also a steward of my family and my workplace, a steward of creation, a steward of the gospel, and a steward of the human community. Together with the Vestry, I am a steward of the mission and ministry of this church, and together with other Christians in other congregations we are stewards of the larger church of which we are a part. When we go to the polls on election day, we are exercising our stewardship of our local, state, and national governments, and the society they serve.

Over time I've discovered that lots of people tithe. However, I have never met anyone who tithed by accident. It takes a plan. People sometimes ask me for concrete steps so here are a few. You'll think of others.

Get out your last tax return. Figure out what 10% of your gross income is and what 10% of your net income is. Decide how much you want to give to the church, how much to charities and other religious purposes. Develop a three year plan. Right now I reserve the difference between the tithe of my net and gross income for discretionary giving, add 2% of my income for the support of seminaries and 0.7% for the Millennium Development Goals. It comes to about 12.7% right now but has gone up and down over time. I wish I could say that it is a smooth progression, but it hasn't been. It has been affected by transitions in employment, and by an extended illness. It was a slower process when we had children in college. But no one in our house has ever gone hungry and the bills have always gotten paid. So I commend the journey to you. It is transforming, and one of the most amazing things about it is that tithing is actually easier than *not* tithing!

Stewardship is serious business but that doesn't mean we can't laugh at ourselves. There is a tale that circulates on the internet that goes something like this...

A one dollar bill met a fifty dollar bill on the street one day and said, "Hey where've you been? I can't remember when I last saw you."

The fifty answered, "Well, I had a busy summer, I was away for several weeks on a cruise, then I spent a month at the shore. Since September I've been to a couple of ball games, spent some time at

the casinos, took my wife to dinner and the theater, that kind of thing. What about you? What have you been up to?"

The one dollar bill said, "Oh, you know, same old stuff, church, church, church."

Today I want you to go home and begin to think about the abundance God has placed in your hands, and what it means to be a trustee of the mission and ministry of the church. What resources has God blessed you with? What is God calling you to do? Are you someone who increases your giving each year or has it been a while? Play with ideas and possibilities. Do the math. Figure out what percent of your income you currently give. You don't have to do anything today. You don't even have to do anything this week. You can just play with the information and possibilities. Think about how you want to increase your giving over time. If you are paying off a car in the next year you may want to fold the sum of that payment into your pledge. If you have a child graduating from college who will free up tuition funds you might earmark some of those for your pledge. If you have paid off your capital campaign commitment, those are dollars you can commit to new purposes. In the words of the old Chinese proverb, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

If you're not sure what constitutes abundance you might visit The Global Rich web site. You can plug in your household income in pounds, dollars, yen or euros and it will tell you where you rank in the world's population. I won't spoil your fun but check it out.

We are not circulating pledge cards yet because we want to encourage you to pray about it first. We will send them out in ten days or so. Commitment Sunday is November 18th and we will print in the December Chronicles the names of those whose pledges are in by the 18th to recognize and thank them. Please use this time to play and pray.

Finally, I am going to close with a prayer attributed to Sir Francis Drake that captures something of the challenge we face.

Disturb us, Lord, when we are too well pleased with ourselves, when our dreams have come true because we have dreamed too little, when we arrive safely because we have sailed too close to the shore.

Disturb us, Lord, when with the abundance of things we possess, we have lost our thirst for the waters of life; having fallen in love with life, we have ceased to dream of eternity; and in our efforts to build a new earth, we have allowed our vision of the new Heaven to dim.

Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly, to venture on wider seas where storms will show your mastery; where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars. We ask you to push back the horizons of our hopes; and to push into the future in strength, courage, hope, and love. AMEN.

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