

“REFLECTIONS ON STEWARDSHIP”

Psalm 100; Mark 12:41-44

November 6, 2005

Laity Sunday

Norm Vedaa, Stewardship Committee

Good Morning. It's an honor to speak to you today about a topic that makes some people uncomfortable—stewardship. A few years ago I would have been in that “uncomfortable” category myself.

However, after serving on both the Board of Trustees and the Stewardship Committee my thinking has changed. On the Trustees, I saw how the annual budget is created and managed. Prior to that I hadn't paid much attention to the budget—it was just “there” and somebody else dealt with it. But when I realized how much money it took to operate the church for a year I sat up and took notice.

My first year on the Trustees budget committee taught me the meaning of every line item. Each line is someone's salary or insurance or the cost of heating the buildings. It is support for Christian education and Our Church's Wider Mission. It is office supplies and light bulbs. It is the big things and the little things.

We are an intentional community—we have grown and chosen to be what we are—a strong and vibrant congregation! We value what we have built here: our beautiful buildings and grounds. We are fortunate for these physical blessings. But we have also built something that is not as visible to the eye. We have built a spiritual community, a community of open and caring people extending their love to one another and to anyone who comes to visit. We reach out to our community and to the world with our missions.

As I stated earlier, Stewardship season used to make me feel uncomfortable. I imagine there are some of you who have had a similar reaction when the volunteer calls to make an appointment for the *DREADED ANNUAL STEWARDSHIP VISIT*. The visits are always pleasant but you know what the bottom line is: MONEY! But it's not just about the money. The dollars that we give are not the true value that our stewardship pledges represent. We pledge our support for the mission of the church because we are the mission. We want to sustain this beautiful and loving community that we have created in the eyes of God. We share a faith and we share a love for all of creation. We give our time and money to this place because it stands for peace and justice in a world of war and injustice. It stands for openness when so many doors are closed to people everywhere. We want our message to survive; we want our voices to resonate in the world. Our stewardship of this church is about caring for the daily needs of its members while looking to the needs of the world we live in. The choices we make today will have far reaching effects on our future.

I would like to close with a small story about my Dad. When I was in high school, my Dad did

something that surprised me—he got 50,000 tree seedlings from the Department of Forestry and planted them all over our farm. He realized by then that none of his children would stay on the farm and someday he would have to sell it. So day by day he planted these seedlings: as a windbreak near the house; in little patches of pasture; and in one big field where we never raised crops.

Over the years I have gone back to visit our old farm several times. There is one particular spot that is so special to me. It is about three acres that is planted in Norway pine. The trees are tall now, and straight and serene. It is a beautiful and peaceful place. My family no longer owns the land where the trees are planted, but the spirit of my Dad lives on in them. That is his legacy. He cared enough for the land to plant those trees for whoever came behind him. He was a steward of the earth.

Our gifts to the church are like little seedlings. We plant them with the faith that they will grow tall and straight and strong. We will not be here forever but our gifts will live on and on. They are our legacy. That is how I now see this time of thanksgiving we call stewardship.

Reflections from Sue Richmond, Deacon

This morning John read Psalm 100, a familiar Psalm of Thanksgiving. And while we usually gives thanks AFTER all of the pledges have been received, I found myself wanting to bring a message of thanks this morning as each of us gets ready to visit with our “sheep friend” and consider this year’s pledge.

We are a fortunate congregation. Collectively, we take our stewardship very seriously—both the stewardship of our time and our money.

Our many boards, committees and other volunteer positions are filled with both new and old members who generously give of their time, energy, and passion. Collectively, we maintain our grounds, develop and administer budgets, and support the worship and spiritual needs of the church. We sing, we laugh, we pray. One thing I love about this church is that both new members and old members alike serve equally. One does not have to earn “tenure” before assuming leadership roles. New members take on active roles, and it is not unusual to find them in leadership positions. You might think that an odd statement, but an encounter with some of my family members a few years ago reminded me that is not typical in many churches. A few years ago, when Doug and I had been with the church maybe three years or so, we both found ourselves chairing one of the boards: Doug was head of Trustees and I was head of the Deacons. As we were catching up with some family members who have been long-time members of other denominations, they said “wow, that is quite an honor.” To be honest, I had not considered being chair an honor—not something to be earned—just something that needed to be done and it seemed to be my turn.

And then we come to the subject of financial stewardship. Unlike Norm, I have never been part of the actual budget or treasury process. Rather I, like you, sit in the pews contemplating how much from my “abundance” (as we heard this morning) to share with the church. But a couple

thoughts stick in my mind as I consider the financial generosity of this congregation. The first is a comment Liz made a few years ago that has always stuck in my mind. She commented that it isn't uncommon for the financial base of a church to be borne by just a handful of families. And what she truly loved about this church was that this responsibility was widely spread among our congregation. Yes, we each give differently but collectively we GIVE to the church—our church. I find great joy in knowing that others care enough about the mission of the church to join me each year to ensure we have a solid financial operating budget to carry out the work of this church. Our solid financial position ensures we can attract and retain talented clergy and staff members. It ensures we have facilities that not only serve us but the community. So many churches are not as fortunate.

The other comment I wanted to share was my reflection on our church's response to the 21st Century Campaign a couple years ago. It was the first capital campaign Doug or I had ever experienced and, quite frankly, I thought we were crazy. The church was facing an increased operating budget as we needed to fund the first full year of a second minister. The local economy was struggling: layoffs had occurred locally impacting some members, and more challenging days appeared to lay ahead. "Oh, ye, of little faith." Amazingly, this congregation came together and met the challenge. We closed on a satisfactory budget and the addition is now a reality. I will never doubt the power of faith and this church again.

We are a strong congregation not by chance but by choice—the choice that each one of us makes each year in terms of the time and the money we give. So as we approach another Stewardship season, feel proud knowing that your pledge joins others to continue the work of this church. Be proud to be part of the United Church of Christ, a denomination that embraces the message of God's love for all and gives liberal Christians a place to explore their faith. Give thanks to yourself and give thanks to your congregational neighbor. Thanks be to God!