

“SAINTS I HAVE KNOWN”
Psalm 95:1-7; Hebrews 12:1-2
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The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger
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I was 27 when I moved to Duluth fresh out of seminary. One of the people on the search committee that had called me to the church was an 82-year-old woman named Mary Roberts, and we soon become friends, real friends. We were separated in age by over 50 years, but that was not the most important aspect of what was between us. We were friends.

Mary was part of a group of older women in that church who had had fascinating lives from my vantage - evangelizing for the YWCA via horse and buggy in the summers, fighting for the right to vote, the right to birth control and contraceptive information, creating open space parks and the first battered women's shelter in Minnesota. They were old school women activists, plotting their strategies over cookies, tea sandwiches, and linen napkins.

I loved them all and Mary in particular. Her father had been the president of the Duluth, Mesabi, and Iron Range Railroad. She had traveled all over the country in her youth in their private rail car, and adventured all over the world with two friends as a widow in her 40's and 50's. Mary had great stories, some of which I've already shared with you. But today is Stewardship Sunday, so I want to share with you just one of Mary's stories that began my development of a theology of giving.

In the 1950s, the congregation called a new minister and soon realized they had made a mistake. It wasn't a good fit. First the murmuring began, parking lot conversations. People didn't like his sermons, didn't like his administrative style. Then church members started staying away from worship, and the church budget was no longer meeting the bills. They had to lay off the church secretary. My friend Mary took on the job as a volunteer. Pledges continued to drop. Mary dug in, raised her pledge, made special gifts to cover such frills as fuel oil for the boiler and the electric bill. At one point, she was running the church school as well as the church office. When she told me this story, I responded, "That minister was lucky to have you for a friend." "A friend," she looked at me, surprised. "I detested the man. But I'm a good Congregationalist, and I sure as heck wasn't going to let some come-and-go minister ruin my church!"

It was a jolt, an important lesson for me. It's an occupational hazard of ministers that they think of churches as "theirs." We sometimes don't consider that we do come and go, and it is the congregation that owns the church. And I mean the word "own" here in the fullest sense of that word, not narrowly. It is all of you who are the stewards of all of this: not only of this building and the budget, but also of this community, of our actions together and our struggles, of our best hopes and aspirations. The church is held by the congregation over time. This may not be a revelation to you, but as a young minister, it was a significant learning for me.

And it was equally significant for me to be shown that the reason we give to the church is not necessarily because we like what the church is doing, or because we enjoy the ministers, or because this community is everything we would want it to be. It's nice when people are generally satisfied with how things are going. But that shouldn't be why we give to the church, because we're happy with the church's ministry. The reason we give to the church is because it's ours, and because God calls us to tend what is ours, to be good stewards of that which is given into our hands.

My friend Mary loved the church: good, bad, and in between, and as part of her faith she took good care of it. For her, to give to the church was to make concrete her love for God, her gratitude for God's presence in her life and all her many blessings. For her, to give to the church was to actively care for what God had given her.

And so, this morning, I would light a candle for my friend Mary, and in doing so, I honor not only her and the generations of the faithful at Pilgrim Congregational Church of Duluth, but equally importantly, I would honor all those who have loved and tended and been good stewards of this church from its beginning - such a long line of saints it has been. Sunday school teachers, trustees, choir members, coffee hour organizers, deacons, moderators, those who have fixed the meals and those who fixed the leaks, all the saints who have decided policy, fought injustice, and rocked babies in the nursery. It is indeed a great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us this day, witnesses who encourage us to tend the church with the same love and devotion to God and God's people as those who have gone before. Thanks be to God. Amen.