

“Be Thankful”

*Psalm 84, Sirach 35:12-17, II Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18,
Luke 18:9-14*

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 20th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 25, October 27, 2019, Reformation Sunday, dedicated to the memory of Eleanor Jane Mitcheltree Werum who passed to eternal life on Monday, October 21, to the memory of the 11 men and women massacred while worshiping at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA one year ago today and always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Jesus was a Storyteller. He was a playwright of sorts. In today’s Gospel in Luke 18, he invites his listeners to imagine a two-person drama that fleshes out his teaching about prayer. Jesus dedicates his miniplay to ‘those who are convinced of their own righteousness and despise everyone else.’

He describes his two characters with such color that they all but beg to be mimed. Jesus' wonderfully satiric portrayal contrasts an unassailably egoistic performer with a starkly humble petitioner. He invites us, of course, to see ourselves in both characters.

The first is a Pharisee, a member of a seriously religious group that strove to obey all of God's 613 laws. This guy might as well have introduced himself with a haughty, "*My name is Narcissus.*" According to Jesus' story, Archie (a nickname he hated!) took up his prayer position and prayed to himself.

In case that statement didn't explain it all, Jesus quoted Archie's monologue. We can almost picture Archie there, posing as if for a mirror and itemizing his litany of personal qualities.

What we note while listening to his recital of virtue is that all his activity centers on keeping himself squeakily spotless and that each of his statements begins with "I." But blameless as he wanted to appear, he exposed himself as just the opposite.

He claims not to be greedy, but he glances at others only to demean them while maintaining his position as the center of his concern. He claims to be honest, yet he was not even honest enough with himself to be aware of his own weaknesses. He thanks God that he isn't an adulterer, but in covenant terms, his self-worship expresses the very idolatry that the ancient prophets traditionally labeled as Israel's prostitution.

Archie observes the letter of the laws of fasting and tithing, totally missing the point that fasting orients us to help us put our

own needs aside and tithing leads us to care for others. Archie offers the world nothing by which he can be remembered.

Jesus describes Archie's counterpart as a tax man. This fellow, let's call him Zack, assigns himself a place on the edge of the sanctuary. There in the shadows he bows his head to pray. His simple prayer is nothing more than an admission of sinfulness and a plea for God's mercy. It seems Zack doesn't care what he looks like as he prays. He comes before God simply, as himself, begging for mercy and ready to accept it. His plea demonstrates his desire to move beyond selfishness. He is honest about who he is, and looks to God to save him from himself.

What would Narcissistic Archie say if someone points out that Humble Zack actually fulfilled what he had claimed in his phony résumé? (drawn from the writing of Sr. Mary M. McGlone, a Sister of St. Joseph).

Jesus' parable explains God's preferential option for the humble and the truly thankful. Only those who know their need for God will pray in a way that God can answer. Truthfully, God likes us best when we are humble enough to admit that we need help – when we are open enough to receive what God wants to give.

The story of Archie and Zack is a great lesson on humility and thankfulness. I believe it is also a great teaching on living and giving with gratitude. Over the past seven Sundays we have heard one member after another stand before us and open themselves up to us. They have spoken from the heart. Each one has woven strands together in our church's tapestry of love and

grace. They have shared why they came to First Church, what kept them coming back, why they love our family of faith and what they love about this place we call our spiritual home.

“Thank you” to all 14 members who have shared and opened yourselves up to us from all ages and stages of life and faith. You are all stewards of the gifts God has given you and I am deeply grateful for the ways in which you live and give with gratitude.

Like our witnessing stewards and like Zack in Jesus’ story today, each one of us is called to be a Steward. We are each called to live and give with gratitude and humility. The truth is Stewardship is about giving to God. It is about humbly turning over total control of our lives over to God. Stewardship is about a prayerful and thoughtful attitude of sharing with others which translates into the action of sharing. It is about joyfully sharing our time, talents, and financial resources.

And Stewardship is about All things in Life. It is about living lovingly and thoughtfully in relation to the earth, all creatures and all people. Stewardship is about conserving water, recycling paper and aluminum, preserving wetlands and rain forests, rivers and water tables, exercising, eating right, managing stress, nurturing our relationships and marriages, raising happy and healthy children, caring for aging parents, as well as caring for the poor and oppressed in our city, state, nation and world AND “Yes” Stewardship is about sharing and living into the life giving

message of faith in Jesus Christ. All of these - all of life lived well for God is important to stewardship.

Just like life itself, stewardship is not an accident. We don't stumble into stewardship by showing up at church and suddenly become generous givers of our time, talent and financial resources. We also don't care for ourselves, God's creation or other people by accident.

People who live and give with gratitude look like this: They give with grace-filled extravagant generosity. Gratitude giving is worshipful, systematic, proportional, planned, sacrificial and joyful. Gratitude giving reflects the entire being of the giver, demonstrates their total involvement in the community, the vibrancy of their faith and exceptional commitment and in trust of God. Gratitude Giving is a witness to God's Gospel of Love, given purposefully over time, given out of faith in God and given in trust and confidence as a way to glorify God and praise the Great Steward of the Universe and the Great Steward of each one of our Lives.

And Remember - all this giving is done **cheerfully** – just as all of life should be lived cheerfully! It is true! Our Generous God really does create generous and thankful people!

In the past seven weeks, we have been called to **“Live and Give with Generosity.”** Our Stewardship Committee has asked us to reflect, pray and act on our stewardship commitment for the year beginning on January 1, 2020. They have asked all of us to turn in our pledges by November 3rd (next Sunday). As of

Friday, October 25, we have received 112 pledges from over 525 letters mailed to households in our congregation. These 112 pledges commitments of \$439,437 (as opposed to the number in Depart to Serve which reflects only through last Tuesday). This is an average of \$3,923.54 per household.

Thank you to the all who have turned in your pledge cards for 2020! As you see, we are 413 Households short of 100% (and I would add new members and generous friends of First Church are also invited to jump and give!). The \$439,437 reflects only 44% of our total goal for 2020. So, lots of us have yet to finish this beautiful campaign which was started September 15th. Together we will get there.

For the 413 households, to guests and great friends of First and even for the 112 if you want to change or adjust your commitments, let me wrap-up with five specific reflections as we respond to “Living and Giving with Gratitude.”

First, your pledge is your most important financial investment in the daily operations of our ministry and mission at First Church. It is NOT enough to place a few coins in the basket each week without thoughtfully investing. If your few coins are thoughtfully set aside and then set in because they are 10% of your income, that is one thing. But I happen to know that for most of us, 10% of our income is not a few coins or a few dollars. Your pledge is your investment in our future. Studies have shown people who pledge give 100% more with

increased joy than those who simply put money in the passing by offering plate. It is a simple fact of life.

Second, each year we know the cost of running the church will rise at least 3-5%. To keep up with these inflationary costs we must either increase our giving, or cut back on staff positions or mission support. With the cost of doing business going up, we have to find ways to keep up. Between cost of health care coverage going up (3% more next year for example), cost of living increases, and increased utility costs, like every household, our “Household of Faith” has to keep up with inflation each year.

Third, we account for every dollar at First Church! Our management of your investment is transparent, while at the same time your pledges and your actual giving are absolutely confidential. The entire annual budget, monthly budget and giving patterns are available for you to see. Our business manager, Sharon Leidheiser, has them in the church office. Each month the Church Council spends time studying the numbers and figuring out where and how to save costs; where and how to increase revenue during the budget year. At year’s end, all organizational financial statements are posted in the annual report. From our Trustee endowed investments to our income and expenditure of every penny, First Church shares its financial information with its members. We are transparent with one exception (again) – your giving is absolutely confidential.

Fourth, you can make a pledge on our website online. You can also pledge by direct deposit through your bank. Pledge online if you are not currently pledging. You can do this anytime, day or night at www.first-church.org. As for direct deposit, I love the direct deposit of my pledge. It helps our family and our church. First, it is simple and safe. Susan and I have chosen this way for years. We never have to worry about it the rest of the year (or actually ever again). Second, it allows us to give purposefully and thoughtfully to the weekly offerings and concentrate on the rest of the mission of the church without worrying about our weekly pledge. Third, direct deposits help the church - especially in the summer time. For example, this summer, because of your direct deposits, we didn't experience the summer drops in cash flow. I highly recommend this way.

Fifth, people ask me, "how much should I give?"

This is a big question to end with... In 2019, our average pledges came in at about \$2800 a year, or \$53.85 a week. But as the initial pledges have been coming in, they are averaging closer to \$4,000! Thank you and let's keep up the great giving! I feel that each of our households needs to increase our pledges by percentages, not a few dollars. If we are to be tithes, we should give 10% of our income to the church and other organizations we love and support. If we did, we would be set!

We are not required to tithe in our tradition and we are not sent bills which assess our dues. Although I celebrate my sisters and

brothers who come from glorious tithing traditions in our faith. Thanks be to God for your vision of sharing and caring.

Rather, we are Congregationalists and we are the United Church of Christ! We operate by faith. We run this church with gratitude and generosity. So, each of us is compelled – by faith - to move steadily toward a tithe - starting at 4-5% of our income given to the church. For example, if your household makes \$30,000 a year, at 4-5% you would give \$1,200-1,500 and a tithe would be \$3,000. If you make \$60,000 a year, you would give at least \$2,400-3,000 (a tithe would be \$6,000). If your household makes \$120,000, you would give \$4,800-6,000 annually (a tithe would be \$12,000). You do the math for your situation as you prepare and turn in your pledge. But I will tell you, if we all gave at 4-5% of our ability to give, we would have a balanced budget and the we would reach all our goals. If we were all tithers, oh my, we would set this world on fire with the power of God’s Holy Spirit.

To those who have pledged, thank you! To those who will turn it in today, thank you! To those who will do it this week and have it to us by Sunday, November 3rd, thank you! To those who will consider your gift and turn it in later, please, please, please let us know what you are doing. No word from you means emails, calls, letters, texts and more from us. That is not fun for any of us. Thank you for simply “getting it in” whatever you are able to do as your 2020 investment in our life together. Let us know. Thank you.

So, let's be like Zack the tax man. Let's be thankful together. May our lives be testimonies of faith lived out with gratitude and joy! Be thankful to God and one another for all the blessings we receive in our lives of faith at First Church. Be thankful everyday! Amen.