

“Who Do You Think You Are?”

Mark 10:35-45

The Rev. Emily Krause Corzine
Associate Minister

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From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 • Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

In October 2009, I traveled with a friend to Malawi, Africa as part of the Marion Medical Mission Shallow Well Program. It is a coordinated effort with the Presbyterian Church in Malawi to build sustainable, clean sources of water to people in rural Africa. It is an amazing experience. An even more amazing experience is walking into the local church on a Sunday morning.

Their style is only slightly different than ours. When you walk into the sanctuary with its stark brick walls and plain glass windows, you see rows and rows of hard wooden benches. The benches at the front **have backrests**. (I suppose, It's one way to encourage people to come early and fill the front of the sanctuary.) The chancel is plain with a communion table and pulpit. The hand stitched church banner stands in the corner.

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In Malawi, October is also stewardship season...sort of.

Stewardship is a way of life-365 days, 52 Sundays of every year. On the side wall of the church, there is a list of all the members and families in the church. Each name is listed in four inch black letters and beside their names, in red numbers, is how much they give to the church. WOW! There it is for everyone to see. There is a level of transparency that is impressive! **There's no mistaking, there's no inflating your numbers,**

there's no hiding. Everyone knows what you give to God. In Malawi, where a large percentage of families are subsistence farmers, working the land growing corn----everyone can see how well your crops are doing and they know how much money you make.

Hmmm? While an interesting visual representation of church giving, it was too late for us to suggest that the Stewardship Team implement that fabulous idea for this year, but I'll certainly offer it for the team to consider in future years. Instead, why don't we take some time this morning and turn to your neighbor and share what you give to the church in any given year? It doesn't have to be exact, you can round up! Doesn't that sound like fun? Go ahead!

Now while I wasn't serious when I made that suggestion, I did want to make a point. Why is it so difficult for us to talk about money? Isn't this the place where we share things – our hopes, our fears, our questions, our struggles? In church, we reveal the status of our health, our pets' health, our relationships, and our faith. But, we wouldn't think of disclosing things like our income or annual giving.

The truth is that if you take the Bible seriously, money is a hard topic to avoid. Jesus, for example, just loved talking about money. Jesus had more to say about money than he did family, marriage and sexuality combined.

I engaged Pastor John in Malawi in a discussion of the **stewardship practices of their congregation**. I said, “You know, if I were to suggest we list the annual giving of our worshippers in a public place in any church in the United States the leadership of said church would certainly ask me, “Who do you think you are?”

He responds, “We give all we can to God. *It’s not about how much you give, it is about why you give.* Once you figure out why to give, everything else falls into place.¹ Even out of their scarcity---this congregation rejoices in the abundance of God and returns what they can to God. This congregation gives **their lives in thanksgiving and service to God.**”

God is a God of abundance. A God of more than enough. Abundance is woven into the very fabric of the Judeo-Christian story itself. From creation on. This is the same God who would eventually provide manna and quail for hungry wanderers in the wilderness, and water from a rock to quench their thirst.

¹ Also found in Mark Allan Powell, *Giving to God*. Professor at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio.

This is the same God who through Jesus Christ would make five loaves and two fishes be enough food for thousands, who through Jesus would make the nets of faithful fisher folk break under an abundance of fish.²

Abundance. Now, God's abundance is not always perfectly apparent to us. The "haves" get more and more, and way too many people go to bed hungry at night. Sometimes God's abundance is a matter of trust.

For the congregation in Malawi--a congregation of materially impoverished people the offering had become the most joyful moment of worship, not an obligation. They rejoice with the opportunity to give what they have to God in return for what God has given them. They trust in a God of abundance to provide abundant life for them. Trusting in a God of abundance to provide an abundant life for others through them.

Abundance is not always a literal experience of material wealth as viewed in the eyes of the world. Abundance is also a state of **mind. A state of grace. A state of trust in God's** promise of life abundant. It takes a certain spiritual discipline to learn to see

² SEWatkins, *Discipline of Hope: God of Abundance*. My sermon was influenced by her sermon preached to a Disciples of Christ Church, April 29, 2011.

the world this way. It takes practice, dwelling on stories of **God's abundance in scripture**; noticing the evidence of God's abundant life all around us: in the joy we take in the presence of beloved family and friends; in the rotating seasons bringing life anew each year; in the mercy that God shows to us again and again. Abundance. Can you see it?

Sure money isn't the only way to give in the Christian tradition. We volunteer. We march for justice. We cook together. We serve those who come through these doors. We respond to the needs around us and around the world with our weekly offerings. We call on others. We extend the **Lord's** Table. We host interfaith Bible study. We teach our children / future generations about the love of God poured out for all people. We give of ourselves. We sing. We rake leaves and paint doors. Maybe we can find a place to add in the list of those gifts of mission and ministry, right next to our names on the wall.

It has been a practice of the Christian church since its very beginning that members of the faith community share some of their resources to support the church and its mission. As to **what that commitment is, that's up to you and God.** God knows what you are up against in your economic life. When it comes to the size of your pledge, God wants you to make a

prayerful, thoughtful, faith-led decision that reflects the fullness of your life.

And then God wants you to apply that attitude to every economic decision you make. Maybe you are one who tithes (giving 10% of your income to God), But like many of us, **maybe you are a work in progress. That's O.K. When it comes to managing money, there is no formula, no one path to follow. All of us have our challenges; all of us fall short of the mark.**

God cares how we spend our money and how we allocate our resources. God wants us to be accountable to God for all that we have.

Last year I heard a faithful long time member give the stewardship moment. She spoke about the tough decisions she and her husband made about where they would allocate their resources. They made the decision to tithe to the church, they give 10% of their income to the church. What struck me was the joy and freedom on her face and in the tone of her voice. She lived trusting in the love and grace of God. She said it is **what God expects of us...and so we give. They make economic decisions that reflect their deepest values.**

Do you know people who regularly make economic decisions that reflect their relationship with God? They are exciting people to be around. There is a dynamic quality to their lives **and there is freedom in their actions. They know... they know** in the deepest part of themselves that their lives belong to God. They know that the decisions they make are pleasing to God.

(Back to Pastor John) He shared one more story about his **church in Malawi: “One Sunday we were taking our weekly offering, men and women were coming up the aisle to place their offering into the basket, dancing and singing with such joy! One woman, who was new to our congregation, came forward during the offering. And as she did, she grabbed the entire offering basket out of the Deacon’s hands!”** (Uh-oh I thought). **“She took the basket of offerings and lifted it high in the air. Then, she placed it on the ground and she stepped in! She put her whole self in the basket. She offered her whole self to God.”**

Her spirit exudes abundance and gratitude to God.

The only response to abundance in life is gratitude commensurate to the abundance you see. The vision of only small abundance means it is time you open your eyes. Put your whole self in the offering plate. Offer you whole self to God. What does abundance and gratitude look like then? May my life and your life and our life together be pleasing to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen.

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