

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Kate Huey at the First
Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio,
Pentecost 15, September 25, 2011, and dedicated to the glory of God!*

“Generosity and Faithfulness”

Matthew 21:23-32

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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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In July of 2000, when I joined the national staff of the United Church of Christ, each of us on the stewardship team was given our own region of the country to take care of. I was very happy to get the Southeast United States, from Virginia through Texas. Every year, I had to convene a meeting of stewardship leaders at a retreat center on St. Simons Island, off the coast of Georgia. (It was a tough job, but someone had to do it.)

I actually learned a lot, listening to those stewardship folks, many of whom had come to the UCC from the Baptist tradition – the *Southern* Baptist tradition, no less. Having been raised Roman Catholic, I was not used to hearing people talk so much about something called *tithing*. I knew what tithing was, of course, but I just hadn’t heard people *talk* about it so much, like it was a core value and everyday practice in their life, part of who they were. I suppose, looking back, I should have wondered why the churches in my region even needed any help with their stewardship ministry, what with all those tithers faithfully and generously giving ten percent of what they had received from God, back to God through the ministry of their churches. And then one day, a church leader at one of these meetings casually remarked to me (he kind of drawled it): “You know, Kate, we may *talk* a lot about tithing down here in the South, but actually *doing* it is a whole nother thing.”

In our reading from the Gospel of Matthew, we're overhearing a conversation at a different kind of "church gathering." Jesus is talking with the religious leaders in the temple in Jerusalem, having made quite an entrance onto the scene, first by reputation with all those healings and works of wonder he's been performing out in the countryside and small towns, not to mention some remarkable preaching that has captivated the crowds and made people leave their old ways – their old way of thinking, their old way of talking, their old way of acting – to leave all that behind and to start all over again. People are feeling like their lives have been *transformed* once they decide to follow Jesus. Just a day or two earlier, crowds of them stood along his path, waving palms, shouting hosannas, as he entered the city, just before he proceeded to clean out the temple of its moneychangers. You might say that Jesus is a *sensation*.

But these people facing Jesus now are not simple country folk, or small-town residents. And they're certainly not prostitutes or tax collectors, two of the most looked-down-upon of the looked-down-upon. No, these are the high and mighty chief priests and elders (well, maybe not so high and mighty, since they are, alas, very much in the pocket of the Roman Empire under whose heel all the people of Israel are living). These religious aristocrats don't want troublemakers upsetting the Romans by agitating the crowds or, God forbid, questioning their own interpretation of the tradition they – and Jesus – have been raised in. Today, we'd say that these leaders have "sold out."

Still, I suspect that, deep down in their hearts, they have a measure of sincerity in their desire to be faithful to their calling. So they have to check out this Jesus, and they come asking him where he gets his power and just who does he think he is. Jesus sees right through them, of course, and does that good rabbi thing of answering a question with a question, and that stumps them, and then he tells them a little tiny story, but a story full of power for the religious leaders then, and for us, here today.

When the religious leaders fall into Jesus' trap and admit that the son who first said "no," but then changed his mind and went into the field to work, was the one who did the will of the father, it's obvious that Jesus is suggesting that they, the ones who are

supposed to be setting an example for others, are just, as one great preacher has said, “yes-men,” people who say the right things and maybe even mean those things in their hearts, but in the end, don’t carry through faithfully. And then, Jesus informs them that those most-looked-down-upon people, the tax collectors and prostitutes, are going to be marching into heaven ahead of them. Can you imagine that? Jesus says that it doesn’t matter what you say, really, if what you say doesn’t go with what you do. Not that it doesn’t matter what you say, but that the two things need to go together, which reminds me of the most memorable of all church meetings I attended during my years down South.

Nine years ago, I was about to lead a stewardship workshop at a church in Lanett, Alabama. As I chatted with folks beforehand, I asked them for their thoughts about giving, and two ladies, one on either side of me, quietly told me that they had tithed all their lives, and had found it to be a blessing. One said, “When my husband and I bought a house, we thought we’d better back off from tithing for a while to make sure we could afford it, but then we thought, ‘No, we’ll just keep tithing,’ and we’ve never missed a house payment.’ ”

So. There I was, the “expert on stewardship from Cleveland,” about to teach *them* about generosity and faithfulness. *I don’t think so.* When I came home, I stood by my kitchen counter, and I opened my pay envelope and looked at my pay stub. I thought about all the blessings in my life, and I felt so profoundly grateful. I thought, what was I waiting for? Until I could “afford” to tithe? Until I wouldn’t *feel* it if I did? I took out my checkbook and wrote a check to Pilgrim Church for one-tenth of my paycheck, a first-fruits offering to God, and then I lived on the rest.

And I also discovered two things I didn’t expect. First, I felt calmer about money in general, like my priorities were now in order. Increasing my giving to a level that challenged me freed me from depending on my own wits and power to feel secure. It helped me to trust more.

Secondly, I discovered something that can best be described with a story about my granddaughter, Ally. When she was a few months old, Ally stayed with us for eight days. It’s fun to play grandma, but

for those eight days, I had to be aware of her at all times, to provide everything she needed, to think about where she was and whether she was safe, feed her, bathe her, clothe her. I had to invest a lot of my time and my *self* in her. When the time came to hand her back to her parents, well, I thought my heart would break. I had bonded with her in a very powerful way. And *that* was what I discovered when I significantly increased my giving to the church. I found that I loved my church even more. I thought I loved it before, but the more I gave, the more I cared about Pilgrim Church, and the more trusting I felt about how my money would be used by the leadership of the church. My life was profoundly changed because two women shared their stories, and their words and their deeds went together. They talked the talk, and they walked the walk, and they walked the talk, too. They showed me by their example and their calm faith what it means not just to *say* “I believe” but to really follow Jesus, not just on Sunday morning, but seven days a week.

Now I know what some of you are thinking: “Is she talking about net or gross?” And I’m glad you asked. It doesn’t really matter. I started with net and moved to gross. Even the percentage isn’t the point: that’s something each one of us has to prayerfully decide upon; for some, 10 percent isn’t possible; for others, they may need to do more. But in any case, it should be something that we feel, an amount that makes us stop and think seriously about what God has given us, and what we will give back. The point isn’t to get all legalistic – this isn’t about law but about a gift from God. You know how God knew we needed to rest but also knew we wouldn’t? That’s why God gave us the Sabbath and told us really, seriously, folks, do this – rest one day a week and honor this day as holy, and you will experience it as a blessing. That’s why God said that we should gather up what we have received and first give back a regular portion. It helps us to remember where it all came from. And we will experience that remembering, and that giving back, as a blessing.

I believe that God wants me to be faithful and generous, but I am weak. Like the worker in Jesus’ story, I say yes, I’ll go into the vineyard, but then I get tired or I change my mind or I lose heart or I put things off. I mean well, but it’s easy to think that generosity is something I can practice later on, when I have *leftover* money. I negotiate with God about it all: God, I want to do the right thing, but

not now. Maybe later. So I need to take a leap of faith and practice being generous and faithful now, in a consistent, disciplined way. I am not saying that I will be saved by this practice, because God's grace is what saves me, but I know that I'm happier and more at peace when I am generous. When I die, I hope someone can say, "She was a generous person."

I trust you with this story because I feel that you will hear that it comes from my heart. Fifteen years ago, when I was in seminary, I wasn't able to tithe, and I understand each time I step into the pulpit that every congregation includes folks who worry about paying for their children's food or their own prescriptions. Some of us here today need a word of hope and encouragement, not another challenge. But I also know that others of us need to be challenged to ask God to help us grow our giving so that this church can be a place of hope for everyone who comes here seeking encouragement, support and strength for what they're facing in their lives.

Remember that question the politicians asked years ago, "Are you better off today than you were four years ago?" Here, in the church, we ask, "Are the widow and the orphan better off today? Are we *all* better off today?" The gospel of Jesus Christ, and the church that preaches it and strives to live it, won't let us forget about those who live on what we consider left over, or extra. Here, in church, we learn and share the vision of a better world; we nurture that vision and work together to bring it to reality. Here in church is where we renew our spirits, and receive love, and hear God's call. If we're too comfortable, we get challenged here. If we're too challenged by life and its hardships, we get comforted here. Our church family, is where we learn and practice generosity so we will be better at it out there, in the world God loves so well.

People say these are "uncertain times," an odd phrase: have you ever known a time that was certain? When your First Congregational ancestors in faith were fighting to abolish slavery, they were engaged in an unpopular effort that carried with it a measure of risk. Every generation faces its own challenge, its own uncertainty, in its own time, and in many ways, we are facing ours today. There has always been fear, anxiety and uncertainty, but some things are true in every age, and every circumstance, and here is one of them: "The truth of

your commitment lives in your heart. And what you do is the best measure of what's in your heart."

I wish I had said that, but I didn't. A writer named Gracia Grindal did. But she reminds me of something a good friend once said to me, one day when we were talking about how much we love the church. "Kate," he said, "each one of us has to ask ourselves, 'Is this the church of my heart?'" We love the church when we give of our lives, our time, our gifts, our money, and when our children see that we *do* these things and not just talk about them. The poet Wordsworth said, "What we love, others will love, and we will show them how." Not just why, but *how*. Young people don't want to hear us preach *what* and *why*, they want to see *how*.

First Congregational United Church of Christ: what a blessing you are to the world! In your ministry, your warm hospitality and your inclusive vision, your witness for justice, you are bringing the gospel to life in this place – you are living in hope and inspiring hope in others. In the face of cynicism, greed and despair, you, First Congregational Church, you are imagining and bringing to reality a different way of living, and that is a gift to every single person who comes through your doors, seeking a new church home, a gift to your community here where you are in ministry, and a gift to the whole wide world that longs for good news, a world that has filled itself too full with spiritual junk food, and hungers now for the gospel that you share.

I think it was Henri Nouwen who claimed that Christians "keep saying that a new way of being human and a new peace are possible." And you are not just saying that a new way of being human and a new peace are possible. You are living that belief out, walking the talk as you follow Jesus on the way. And out of that deep commitment, that deep faith, will spring a generosity that will share what you have been so abundantly blessed with by God, so that this historic, courageous congregation will continue to flourish and be a vital, thriving place of ministry and good news here in Columbus, and far beyond, in ways you can hardly imagine and yet you dare to hope for. Amen.

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