

*Three different sermons delivered by Neal Brower, Jennifer O’Kezie-Watts and Cori Rowley at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 17, October 9, 2011.*

## **“Giving to God”**

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***By Neal Brower***

Althea and Leona were sisters who lived at Wesley Acres, the Methodist-sponsored retirement community where I worked as an orderly in high school and college. Wesley Acres was a *very Methodist place*. Every single morning, Althea and Leona would visit the Health Care Center, where I worked, and recite to every resident who displayed any level of consciousness—and to some who didn’t, “This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.” (That’s Psalm 118:24 for any of you keeping score from your pews.)

This was in the mid-to-late 1980’s, when Dana Carvey’s “Church Lady” was one of the most popular bits on Saturday Night Live. And while Althea and Leona may have looked the part, with their painfully sensible shoes and the very tight Iowa perms administered to them in the basement beauty shop, I felt only love from them, and none of the sanctimony and judgment that provided so many laughs for Carvey’s Church Lady on SNL.

But as a high school kid, I was looking to the future, and I didn’t really appreciate the importance of just one day—particularly today. These women have been church ladies for a long, long, long time, I thought to myself--don’t Althea and Leona know any other Bible verses?

Which wasn’t really fair of me, I must say... because I didn’t know any Bible verses then. And I still don’t. I’m a lifelong churchgoer, but I’m not much of a reciter or memorizer—I’m terrible with song lyrics and all of my recipes are written on cards.

All of my life, my church experiences have been less about the thinking and more about the work—and, just in case you’re wondering, I am aware that there’s a pretty important biblical

message about faith and works, but we're not going there today. Here at First Church, that has meant that I've sung in the choir and served in a variety of organizational and communication roles on committees such as personnel for the past three years and the capital campaign committee last year. This year, as Administration Commissioner-Elect, I find myself before you as a member of the Stewardship Committee, charged with explaining to you why I pledge and give to First Church.

I can tell you that, for me, giving to the Church began out of a feeling of obligation. And for all of you who don't believe in guilt and obligation, I hasten to add that I brought mine with me from Iowa—no one at First Church is to blame for it! The more important message here, though, is that recently I realized that, somewhere along the way, my giving out of a sense of duty and obligation has transitioned to giving inspired by gratitude and joy. This feels a lot better (and this Hawkeye is still working at being OK with that).

It took Kate Huey's message from two weeks ago for me to realize that I've moved beyond thinking about my gift in terms of what I could do with the money if I kept it. Instead of considering the opportunity cost, I think about how my relationships with First Church and with God enrich my life—challenging me to grow in my faith and my thinking and giving me strength when I'm not particularly glad in “the day that the Lord hath made.”

Now, more than 25 years later—enough time to have outlived my first dog and outlasted my first significant adult relationship, and long enough to have developed sensitive teeth and my first spot of skin cancer—I think that I understand what Althea and Leona meant when they repeated that same Bible verse every single day, “This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

Each of our lives is one of God's Wondrous Gifts, and a life is made up of thousands of days—some days are wonderful and others aren't so good. And sometimes the bad days can come in what feel like pretty long streaks. But God is always there, working through each of us and our First Church friends, helping us to help each other and challenging us to be better versions of ourselves.

I am so grateful that God has brought us together here to exercise our faith—to enter First Church to worship together and to depart to serve the community and God.

This is the day the Lord has made, and I *will* rejoice and be glad in it.

***By Jennifer O’Kezie-Watts***

Good morning everyone. My name is Jennifer Okezie-Watts and I became a member of First Church early this year. I’m flattered, and a little nervous, to be standing in front of you now to share a story about why I share the gifts God has given me with First Church.

A few Sunday’s ago during Children’s Time, Rev. Tim and Mark presented all the 4<sup>th</sup> graders with their very own Bible. I noticed a couple of days after this ceremony that my 4 year old daughter Mariah began to show interest in her own age-appropriate Bible that includes about 20 popular Bible stories. She carried it around our home and even to church last Sunday. She had us retell the stories in it, and even began to sleep with it. This went on for a few days. Then, one evening as we prepared for bed, Mariah asked me to play church with her. How could I refuse?

She placed her Bible open-faced on an ottoman in front of her and had me sit on the floor with my “baby” on my lap. “God is Christ” she yelled, projecting her voice. She then looked at me with a prodding look and pointed at me. I took my cue and repeated her statement—“God is Christ”. Then, she said “And, you can't be mean to others.” I repeated on cue as expected. She continued, “If you do something bad and say sorry, God will borgive you.” The next part of the pretend play involved dismissing me to attend Worship Connections. I proceeded to the other side of the room for my lesson.

First Church has helped to build this foundation of love and forgiveness for my daughter. Mariah is absorbing the love of God and the love from her neighbor here at First Church. I am able to observe her discovering her relationship with God and applying Biblical teachings in her everyday life. First Church has welcomed my daughter and me and helped me to continue my journey to follow the commandment which is the greatest according to *Matthew Chapter*

22: *Verses 36-39* --- “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

In the past, I was a perpetual visitor at a church. Not wanting to join for fear of commitment and failure, hiding in the shadows. Taking the pledge card with no intention of returning it for fear that I wouldn't be able to meet my commitment or make one of any substance—just not make the mark.

I had no doubts when I realized that First Church was the right church home for me. I now feel joy and exuberance, not guilt when I pledge and offer my talents or time in the name of the Lord. Here I am accepted and guided to move closer to God. It's not a straight path. I continue to explore how I can best balance my giving at church, home, with my family, friends, and even myself. A key learning that I acquired recently from one of Rev. Tim's webinar series is: Our treasures, talents, and time are only ours because God has provided them for us. If I feel they are mine on my own accord, I am less likely to give them freely.

### ***By Cori Rowley***

I was intensely nervous about getting up here and speaking. I was so nervous that I found it hard to put pen to paper. My head hurt from creating endless “mind maps” of what I wanted to say. I stopped by the church yesterday to test out the sound system for the 11:00 service. Afterward, I stopped across the street at my Alma Mater, The Columbus College of Art and Design. They were having their annual Family Weekend and Alumni Homecoming. There, I ran into a leader who inspired me a great deal while in school. He asked what I'd been up to. After telling about my design work and current endeavors, I told him that I was preparing to speak to all of you. He told me, “Just remember, they're all rooting for you.” Then it hit me, why should I be nervous? First-Church, you are my family. Those of you, who know me, have seen me grow up. You have witnessed and been a part of my entire adulthood. You have been with me for 1/3 of my life.

I found it oddly hilarious back in the spring when I was asked to join the Stewardship Committee. What in the world did I, a 25 year old, have to offer to such a committee? Truth be told, my husband and I had never filled out a pledge card until the past year. The number I put down was so measly that I was almost too embarrassed to turn it in! For years we had been writing notes to Reverend Tim that went something like this, *“At this time we are unable to give financial gifts to First-Church, but we will continue to give of our time and talents in any capacity we can.”*

Every year, like clockwork, we wrote a similar letter at the end of the Stewardship Campaign, you know - when you start getting calls and emails and letters.

You see – it wasn’t that we didn’t want to give to the church; it’s that we honestly couldn’t see how it was possible for us. We joined this church while we were students living off of Ramen Noodles. We got married here as we were starting our careers. We had hit bumps in the road, with financial and career setbacks. For a year we even moved in with my in-laws to save money, in an effort to get out of the expensive renting pit and buy a home of our own. Each year when we wrote that note to Reverend Tim, I felt empty, I felt tired, I felt unworthy and I felt guilty. All of these feelings, of course, were such a waste of time - because I had not yet discovered what it really meant to be a good steward.

It wasn’t until last year while working on the Capital Campaign, *The Future’s Broadening Way*, did I realized just how important physical stewardship really is. The Capital Campaign had asked me to design a logo, brochures and other print material for the effort of raising funds. I worked and worked until we had the perfect logo to express the great joys of giving and how it branches out beyond our doors and into the city. When the logo was complete, I thought, “Not bad.” We unveiled the campaign and a female church member came up to me, at coffee hour and said “You. You made this?” I looked at her confused and I think I eventually claimed my work. She said, “This is absolutely beautiful.” She went on to tell me how inspiring the printed pieces were. At this very moment I realized that my work was not done in vain. I wasn’t just doing this graphic design stuff for the church because I could. No - I was doing it because visual elements tell a story that in turn could encourage someone to give.

I went home that Sunday and thought about giving all day. I remember thinking, if I can make a difference with this tiny logo, in what other ways can I bring people closer to the church by using the talents that I already have.

What I'm really trying to get at is this. When you feel as though you're not giving enough, give more. When you are at the end of the race, open up into a full on sprint. Whether it's at home, at work or at church, push yourself. At the end of the day, everything that you do when you're out in the world is a skill you can harness to help here, in wondrous ways. If you want to help, but don't know how your talents fit, tell someone. It's amazing how First-Church acts as a social-network of giving.

In a time where the word economy makes some of us shudder, I understand that this time of year may not be everyone's favorite. In fact, I'll admit it; we used to not show up most of October because we didn't want to be asked to give financial gifts. I understand that work or lack of work is stressful. I understand that in times like these we may not be following our dreams in our careers, but rather just trying to pay the bills. So if you, like I find yourself wanting more from your talents, wanting to share the gifts you have been given, take advantage of the opportunities here at First-Church.