

Date: October 23, 2005

SUNDAY: Ordinary 30

SERMON: Willing Hearts, Open Hands

Text(s): Exodus 35:4-10, 20-29; 36:2-6

Matthew 6:19-21, 24-33

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Once upon a time, there was a farmer who lived happily with his family in a large old farmhouse. It might even have been Maine Public Radio's "Humble Fahmuh." He was a good farmer; he worked hard from sunup to sundown in his fields, he cared for his animals well, making sure they were fed regularly and had clean straw for bedding. It was a prosperous and well-run farm. But one night, disaster struck. The farmer's house caught on fire due to some faulty electrical wiring. The family all managed to escape from the house to safety outside, but by the time the fire trucks arrived, the blaze was out of control, and the farmer and his family stood huddled under blankets on the lawn, sadly watching their home destroyed by the flames.

Over in the barnyard, all the animals were watching too. They felt very sorry for the farmer, because they knew how hard he worked, and what a good man he was. They were talking among themselves trying to figure out if there was something they could do to help. Finally, the best egg-laying hen in the chicken house spoke up: "I know!" she said excitedly to the pig who was standing nearby, "it's almost morning, and the family is very cold huddled under those blankets. They're bound to be hungry. You and I could make a hot breakfast for them."

"That's a great idea," replied the pig. "What shall we make them for breakfast?"

"Why, bacon and eggs, of course," said the chicken.

"Wait just a minute! the pig retorted, "not so fast. For you, that simply involves making a contribution. But for me, it means total commitment!"

That old joke sprang to mind when I was reflecting on our lessons today and thinking about

the theme of Christian stewardship as we begin our annual fall campaign to encourage us all to be faithful and good stewards as we look ahead to the ministry and mission of this church in the coming year. Four weeks from today, all of us will be asked to bring our pledges or faith-promises as I prefer to call them, to present to God in a special march offering as we've done in the past.

Stewardship is something that goes much deeper to the root of our identity as Christians than just the right use of our time, talents, and money. It is really about being entrusted by God with the care of the whole creation. Stewardship is a sacred calling and trust.

But while stewardship includes much more than our relationship to money and possessions, it does not include less, and for most of us who live in the modern world, our relationship to money is often where the question of our commitment comes to a sharp point of focus. Our world uses money or wealth as the measure of so much in life, which is probably why we surround it with so much secrecy. As someone observed the other day in a conversation our society is not nearly as secretive about sex as we are about money. Sex is openly discussed on talk shows like *Today* or *Oprah* and graphically depicted on prime-time TV shows. In the checkout line at Hannafords, the magazine covers that we all read while we're waiting make us all sorts of promises of ten new tips that will reinvigorate our sex lives. (Don't tell me you don't read them, too. I don't believe that for a minute.) And if you use email, you already get those spam emails that try to sell you pills or devices that will assist you in that department.

But not so with money. We are the most materialistic nation on earth; we spend money profligately, but we don't talk about it, or more accurately, we don't talk about our personal relationship to money. We don't mind talking about money in the third-person, as it were—about money in general. But we keep our own relationship to money quite close to the vest.

Why? Well, I suspect it's because we know that money is a very powerful thing— so powerful that Jesus, in our Gospel lesson today, identifies it as the chief rival to God for our devotion. Jesus says that if we do not acknowledge God as our Master, then Money will be our Master. And he goes on to say, we can't serve two masters: we have to choose. Either we will serve God or we will serve money, but we can't serve both.

It's this natural tendency of money to become the object of our worship that makes us reluctant to talk about it. We surround money with an aura of mystery and secrecy to protect our relationship to it. We recognize money's power, and so we keep it secret, because we don't want to show to the world that which we hold to be our dearest and deepest treasure of the heart or we don't want to expose ourselves to the full reality of that which we hold sacred. I suspect that's why of all the sayings of Jesus the Gospel writers included in our Gospels, there are more on the subject of our relationship to money than any other subject. Money is powerful, and therefore dangerous. And we testify to that dangerous power by being secretive about it.

Isn't it strange, given that Jesus talked so much about money, how many people think that it's inappropriate for the church to talk about money? All of us probably get tired being solicited for charitable gifts from all the non-profit groups that ask us to give, but we don't seem to have the same sense that it's inappropriate for them to ask as we do when the church asks us for money.

So where did we get the idea that it's somehow inappropriate or unspiritual, or at least in bad taste, for the church to talk about or ask for money? It's a rather ridiculous notion, isn't it? If money really is the chief rival to God for our heart's true devotion, then to talk about it in church is one of the most spiritual and necessary things we can do.

The writers of the Old Testament also

talked a lot about money too; it wasn't only Jesus. In our lesson from Exodus this morning, which recounts the building of the portable sanctuary that the Israelites carried with them in their years of nomadic wanderings in the Sinai desert following the Exodus from slavery in Egypt, we see Moses conducting a stewardship campaign. He puts out the call for all those of a willing heart, all those who are stirred in their hearts to provide the materials needed for the building of the tabernacle. Not only were the most basic materials requested, but items of beauty and decoration, to make the tabernacle beautiful as well. He also called for those with the skills and craftsmanship, fine workers in wood and metal and jewelry to give their time and talents to the project.

Does this sound at all familiar? If you think the practice of churches asking their members for generous giving and commitments to maintain their ministries and their buildings is something that only modern churches do, then this text ought to make us realize that there's nothing new under the sun. Any community devoted to a common mission or goal needs the commitment of its members if they are going to succeed in carrying out that mission.

But Moses did put out the call. And look what happened! *And they came, everyone whose heart was stirred, everyone whose spirit was willing, and brought the Lord's offering to be used for the tent of meeting and for all its services and for the sacred vestments. So they came, both men and women, all who were of a willing heart, everyone bringing an offering of gold and rings and pendants and blue and purple and crimson yarn or tanned goatskins or fine leather.*"

So far it sounds like we're still talking about contributions. But wait. The story isn't done yet. Here's where we see that they weren't just making a contribution, but were giving themselves in total commitment. *"They still kept bringing him freewill offerings every*

morning, so that all the artisans who were doing every sort of task on the sanctuary came, each from the task being performed and said to Moses, 'The people are bringing much more than enough for doing the work that the Lord has commanded us to do. . . So Moses gave command . . . and the people were restrained from giving.' Now, I ask you, when's the last time you heard the pastor or chair of the Stewardship Committee or the Church Treasurer stand up and say, "OK, folks, you've given more than enough to get the job done. Please don't give anymore for while?" (Mark, if we give that much, will you stand up and tell us we can stop?)

Several years ago, I returned to the States from Paris to attend the American Church's annual Board of Directors meeting. I stayed in the home of a couple who were Board members, who had been part of our congregation for six years before returning to the U.S. They're from ordinary middle class Midwestern origins. Life's been good to them—he was an automotive engineer, and they've made the most of what they've been given. They live in comfortable retirement now, and both throughout their working life and now in retirement they've been very generous givers to their church and to other charitable causes they feel strongly about. They also give very generously of their time as volunteers in good causes as well. They practice tithing—giving at least 10% of their income, though I suspect that they may actually give considerably more than that. Every church would be very lucky to have a dozen like them in the congregation. Yet, even they are not immune to having some anxieties about money or exempt from having to make some deliberate choices about whether money is their master or their servant.

The sharp decline in the stock markets when the 90's "bubble" burst has cut deeply into their retirement savings, as it has for many others. He shared with me that when he began to feel anxious about money issues, it motivated him and

his wife to seriously re-examine their patterns of spending and consumption and making cutbacks. In the process, he said, they discovered that there were many things they were doing that they really didn't need and so they have simply let them go, from small things like getting a cheaper cable TV connection with fewer channels to big things like selling a pleasure boat that they used much less frequently now that their children were all grown.

One thing he did not include in the list of things they cut back on, however, is their giving to the church and to other mission causes they support. Their stewardship of God's gifts, expressed through their giving is not just a matter of making a contribution, but a matter of genuine commitment. If something had to go, it was going to be other things rather than their commitment to be faithful stewards. And because of that, they're able to have money, but remain free from the power of money to enslave or to turn their hearts away from devotion to God, or to weigh them down with anxieties. They're making deliberate positive choices, not just mindlessly allowing their money or their anxieties about money to control them and dictate their lives.

That's the difference between making a contribution and total commitment, you see. It's not a matter of whether we have a lot of money and assets or very few. What matters is our relationship to our money and to God that our giving represents. When our hearts are stirred up by the Spirit, when our hearts are willing, then our hands will be open to give without calculation, without a grudging sense of obligation or duty, but with joy, with generosity, with abundance. If we're willing to give in that spirit, we won't have any budget worries. Our vision for our mission and ministry together will have all the support it needs—perhaps even, like those Israelites building their tabernacle, we will have much more than enough.