

We are Stewards, not Owners

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson, pastor of Knox Presbyterian Church, Kenmore, NY on November 17, 1985; the 25th Sunday after Pentecost. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 1:10-20; Psalm 24; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 13:44-46.

On this stewardship Sunday I have good news and bad news. *First, the good news.* In six years our giving to budgeted items has increased by over \$31,000. We've pledged an additional \$15,000 to Presbyterian homes. We've spent over \$100,000 to replace the boiler, the wiring, the lighting fixtures, to rebuild the organ and to repair the roof. Most of this has come from non-budgeted giving. Our radio broadcast continues as a result of non-budgeted giving. This past year the young people encouraged us to use Love Loaves to raise \$1000 for the hungry in Ethiopia. All in all we really have a giving church. I've talked to some of my colleagues about this. They're amazed at our giving. "How do they do it?" they ask. And I tell them that we've got a lot of dedicated men and women who tithe.

But there's more good news. This year we've see a number of signs of spiritual vitality in the church. *This Spring* a number of people professed their faith in Jesus Christ for the very first time. It was a moving experience to see how they came to our church through the network of friendships and circumstances. Many of them have become, not simply nominal members, but integral parts of the Body of Christ.

In August Laura joined us. She's been spending lots of time with the youth. She's led them on retreats and work projects. She's started a singles ministry. We invited Laura to help us even though we didn't have the money pledged to call her. We took a step of faith anyhow and somehow we've managed to pay her.

We started off *in September* with the best church school attendance we've had in a long time. There's been a renewed commitment to *prayer*

as a result of the six week prayer adventure that 18 people took part in. I wish more of you could've been at the last session when each one of us knelt and received the laying on of hands with prayer. It was wonderful to see the tears of joy flow. There's also been *a renewed Sunday evening* program. Twenty to thirty people are learning how to express concern and love for others more intensely so that friends and neighbors might come to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. All this is good news and we should be rejoicing in it.

But there's also bad news. Some of our most faithful *members have moved* over the last several years. I think of the Wynns, the younger Vanderweides, the Shens, the Fullers, the Landases, Don and Cathy Crippen, the Frasers and others. Many of our most committed *members have died.* Some of you've been forced to retire early because of the economic situation here in Buffalo. Your income has been drastically cut. Added to that is the recent news of the impending *clasing of Trica* with the loss of over 1000 jobs. Some of you may lose jobs.

Partially as a result of this our giving has fallen short of the budget this year. That's really nothing new. It's happened before. In the past we've always been able to meet our commitments. Will we be able to this year? *We can* if all of us move in the direction of tithing. I read in the paper last week that the official poverty level in the U.S. for a family of 4 is \$10,609. A tithe of that is over \$1000 or \$19.23 per week. Now we've got about 250 families in our church. If every family were living on the poverty level and we were all to tithe we would have a budget of over \$250,000. Despite all the tithers in the church many of us have a long way to go.

I urge you to move in this direction. It's pretty hard to start tithing as

an adult unless you have an intentional plan to increase the percentage you give. For example, if you're now giving \$1 a week, increase it to \$1.50. If you're contributing \$10 a week, try upping it to \$12. Sit down and right out your yearly wages on a piece of paper. Take 10% of that and write that down. If you make \$15,000 a year, that's \$1,500. Then draw up a plan, maybe a five year plan that will gradually move you in the direction of tithing. - And if you are sure about it, you can make a plan to give something every week.

Now let's look at this good and bad news in the light of our Scripture lessons. I'd like to spell out *three principles of stewardship* which, if understood and believed by all of us, would motivate us as Christians to reach and surpass our budget for this year and next.

1. *We're not owners, but stewards.* "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof, the world and all that dwell therein." I once heard a story I've never forgotten. A little boy made a wooden boat for himself. He carefully cut out the hull, a keel, and a cabin. He drilled a little hole in the hull for the mast and cut a piece of cloth to make the sail. He sanded it smooth and painted it a shiney red and yellow. He was really proud of it. He took it down to the stream to float it but one day the boat drifted away, got caught in the current and was lost. The little boy went home sad that day without his boat. A few weeks later there was a block sale in his neighborhood. And as he walked down the street looking at the different items for sale he spotted his red and yellow boat. It was dirty and the paint was chipped but he knew it was his. Somebody had found his boat and wanted to sell it. He just had to have his boat back so he dug into his pocket and paid for the boat that already belonged to him. Then he said to the boat, "I made you and I have bought you. Now you're twice mine."

That's what God says to us. He made us good but we got away from him.

We got lost. Then Christ came and found us and bought us back. We already belonged to him because he made us, but because he loved us he bought us back at the cost of his blood. We doubly belong to God. All that we have belongs to him. We don't own anything. We're merely God's stewards. That should put a new perspective on our giving.

2. *God doesn't want us to give our money unless we give ourselves to him.* In the days of Isaiah the prophet the people of God gave their offerings and sacrifices but God said, "I hate them. Take them away. I don't want your money. I want you. I want *all* of you." God doesn't want our money unless he has our souls and bodies as well.

Several years ago we had a youth rally down-stairs with several other Presbyterian churches and we danced the hokey-pokey (we didn't tell the elders.) Do you remember how it goes? "You put your right foot in, you put your right foot out, you put your right foot in and you shake it all about." Then it's your left foot, then your right hand, then your left hand, and so on. But that can't happen in real life. You can't split yourself up and let one part of you do one thing and another part of you do something else. Sometimes people try. They try to do their homework and watch the T.V. It's not usually a success. Sometimes they try to eat and talk. That's a mess. You can't really put a part of yourself into anything and do a good job-- least of all into your service of Christ. If our lives are going to be transformed we've got to present our whole selves as a living sacrifice to God.

So I want to urge you to do something really radical as you think about signing your pledge card. I'm urging you *not* to pledge anything until you first pledge yourself to Christ. "Here I am, Lord Jesus. I bow to you as Lord and Savior. I don't want to be conformed to the world. I want to be

transformed. I want to be renewed. I want to approve your will. I want to serve you with all the gifts you've given me". Let me repeat. Don't give *any* money to the church until you give yourself to Christ. You can't bribe God. You can't tip God. You can't pay God conscience money. God hates that kind of stuff. God doesn't want your money unless you give yourself to him.

3. Jesus is the pearl of great price. All of us are merchants seeking for happiness, for security, for fame, for eternal life. So often we try to find what we're looking for in our possessions. And so often *our possessions become a curse to us.* A fellow was riding in an airplane. He looked across the aisle and there was a beautiful girl. She had a huge diamond on her finger. He was really interested in gems. He slid across the aisle and spoke to her. "I couldn't help noticing your diamond," he said. "Tell me-- it's so large-- is it famous?" She said, "Yes, it's a Klopman diamond." He said, "A Klopman diamond? Can you tell me something about it?" She said, "Yes, it has a curse with it." Now he was really fascinated. He said, "What's the curse?" She said, "My husband, Mr. Klopman." So often our possessions carry a curse with them. They become the source of worry and anxiety. We become possessed by our possessions.

But what we're really looking for in life can't be found in possessions. It can be found only in Christ. He has happiness, joy, peace, healing, security, eternal life, status, power, everything. So we say, "I want this pearl. How much is it?"

"Well," the seller says, "it's very expensive."

"But how much?" we ask.

"Well, a very large amount."

"Do you think I could buy it."

"Oh, of course. Everyone can buy it."

"But didn't you say it was expensive?"

"Yes."

"Well, how much is it?"

"Everything you have," says the seller.

We make up our minds. "All right, I'll buy it," we say.

"Well, what do you have?" he wants to know. "Let's write it down."

"Well, I have ten thousand dollars in the bank."

"Good-- ten thousand dollars. What else?"

"That's all. That's all I have."

"Nothing more?"

"Well, I have a few dollars here in my pocket."

"How much?"

We start digging. "Well, let's see-- thirty, forty, sixty, eighty, a hundred, a hundred twenty dollars."

"That's fine. What else do you have?"

"Well, nothing. That's all."

"Where do you live?" He's still probing.

"In my house. Yes, I have a house."

"The house too, then," He writes that down.

"You mean I have to live in my camper?"

"You have camper? That, too. What else?"

"I'll have to sleep in my car!"

"You have a car?"

"Two of them."

"Both become mine, both cars. What else?"

"Well, you already have my money, my house, my camper, my cars. What

more do you want?"

"Are you alone in this world?"

"No, I have a wife and two kids."

"Oh, yes, your wife and kids, too. What else?"

"I have nothing left! I'm left alone now."

Suddenly the seller exclaims, "Oh, I almost forgot! *You* yourself, too! Everything becomes mine- wife, kids, house, money, cars- and you too."

Then he goes on. "Now listen- I'll allow you to use all these things for the time being. I want you to be my steward. But don't forget that they're all mine, just as you are. And whenever I need any of them you must give them up, because now I'm the owner." That's how it is when we discover that Jesus is the pearl of great value and we come under the ownership of Jesus Christ

Maybe you've already taken a pledge card, filled it out and plan to put it in the collection plate. Don't put it in. Tear it up and take another. Think about what God has been saying to you. Don't sign the pledge card until you've thought all this through and thoroughly prayed about it. Don't sign anything at all until you realize--

- that you and all you have belongs to God to begin with;
- that God doesn't want just your money, he wants all of you;
- that Jesus is the pearl of great price, more valuable to have than anything else in the world. In him we find all that we're looking for in this world.

Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.