

Somewhere Between Zacchaeus and Ananias and Sapphera

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Readings: Micah 3:5-12 and 1 Thesalonians 2:9-13

Thermometer Stewardship

When I was growing up in Lincoln, Nebraska, my family attended Rosemont Alliance Church. This evangelical congregation was a part of an evangelistic heritage of a group of missionary churches from the Christian and Missionary Alliance. I grew up attending camp meetings and evangelistic crusades where empty KFC buckets were passed around and filled to the brim. So, we knew how to raise money.

I remember very clearly how stewardship Sunday went each year. In front of the congregation, a gigantic thermometer was placed for all to see with the tip top being our goal for the year. Cards were handed out to the congregation and, as the Spirit moved people, they handed in their cards when the ushers passed around the basket. Someone read the amounts that were being pledged toward our annual goal.

Most years we did not reach the goal on the first passing of the plate. So, the minister would have us close our eyes and bow our heads in prayer. Then he would make an impassioned prayer and with our eyes closed would ask people to raise their hands with additional pledges as the Spirit moved them. It was mostly a dramatic crescendo with our eyes closed hearing: "Praise the Lord, another \$250 dollars has been given to the Kingdom of God."

"Who else needs a blessing?"

On a very rare occasion even the Spirit failed and desperate times called for desperate measures. That is when the male deacons stood at the door and stewardship became an act of attrition.

"No one is leaving until the thermometer reaches the top!" Pastor Heineman declared. "We will not leave this place until we have shown Jesus that we are worthy!"

That never failed. Eventually the Spirit would wear people down and they would loosen their pocketbooks whether they had the money to give or not. Each year the thermometer reached its apex and we had fulfilled our ancient responsibility toward Stewardship. Right?

Budget Stewardship

Thirty years later I am a pastor in the Presbyterian Church and most often, when Stewardship Sunday rolls around, we have a much more boring, decent and orderly view. Each committee has put together their suggestions to the finance committee for the amount they would like to spend in the year 2018. This will be reviewed and voted on by the session. Then at the yearly congregational meeting, this budget will be reported to the congregation.

When you have a called and installed pastor, this will be the item in the budget that the congregation will vote for or against. This budget is how we determine the amount that we would like from you for pledges, tithes and offerings. We don't have a thermometer, but we do have a budget. If we want heat, if we want air conditioning, if we want an office manager, if you want new and exciting ministries, you must give money. That is the tall and short of it. No mystery. We want you to give money so that Immanuel Presbyterian Church can fiscally continue its ministry and mission in Nob Hill and the uttermost parts of the earth. So, please give.

I named this sermon "Between Zacchaeus, Ananias and Sapphera" for a reason. I think financially we could biblically give somewhere between the two. First, there is the overly forgiving Jesus who, in my estimation, lets the crook Zacchaeus off the hook by forgiving him without Zack promising to return all his ill-gotten gain or the much more judgmental Peter who has Ananias and Sapphera zapped dead because they lie and withhold money from the nascent church. This leaves you with great leeway of gracious forgiveness and a little bit of fear for divine repercussions. Let your conscience be your guide.

So now that we have asked you to be more generous with money than you have ever been before, to be challenged into giving, I am left with the question, "Is that Stewardship?"

No, that is too simple. If we still believed in simony, then merely giving your money for salvation, a temporal blessing or merely to feel a strange warmth in your breast would be enough. Yet, we believe it to be much more. You may have to do, be and give much more to the divine than a direct deposit to your favorite charity.

Being Stewards

I love the prophet Micah and I hate the prophet Micah simultaneously. He acts like there is so much more than money to a relationship with the divine. Prophets and leaders are not to do God's work out of a profit motive. Situations of prosperity are not necessarily blessings of peace, nor are times of scarcity a judgment of war. Prophets, priests and kings will not be able to lean on the Lord for a price tag. Why? Because it is all about God.

There is no ledger here where we look and see if our returns or dividends are sufficient to discern the glory of God. It is all the Lord's to begin with. When we take ownership of that which is God's, we lose the blessing that a covenant with the divine promises.

Micah uses the word "equity" to remind the nation of Israel that justice is always embedded in our stewardship of this planet. We are to be good stewards of everything in creation, bending our lives toward the humble walk with our creator. A walk that proves that we are just. The distortion of equity is highlighted when there is corruption amongst the prophets, priests and kings. It does not mean that everyone else is off the hook.

The challenge of being good stewards is much more of a challenge than deciding which charity to give for a tax break at the end of the fiscal year. It is the challenge of how you live your life,

how you care for your neighbor, how you spend all your money, how you spend all your time, how you use all your talents, and how this reflects your love for the almighty. That is much more than that bounteous check that I anticipate you will write to Immanuel Presbyterian Church. It is living all your life in faith that everything, including your life and breath has been given to you. What you do with it becomes a response to the one who gave it to you in the first place. That is exciting, challenging, and convicting. Yet, it is far from impossible.

We have a God who loves us, is slow to anger, and will honor every faithful gift as an act of worship. That is the beginning of stewardship. We have the rest of our lives to praise God by giving. Thanks be to God.