

Stewardship Sermon

September 30, 2012

I Timothy 6: 7-19

Dolly Cardwell

Next Saturday as most everyone here knows, is the day of our Silent Retreat when all over this forty acres, this people of God will be mindful of where they have come from, where they are going, each one mindful in an evaluating sort of way, of both the inward journey and the outward journey. Commitment is the issue at hand. To commit or not to commit to living in covenant with the rest of us who will be making the same decision. To commit or not to commit to taking our share of the ultimate responsibility for both deepening our own personal growth as well as deepening our life together. I am very grateful for the privilege of recommitting for my 55th year to Our Covenant One with Another. What a journey with this people in this place!

Walter Bruegemann says that we live in a world where many people are satiated (by satiated, he means their appetites are excessively supplied). He says that we live in a world where many people are satiated and an ever-increasing number are living in despairing scarcity. I think we must confess that as a church community, the Church of the Covenant is pretty much in between, neither satiated nor despairing in poverty. As a community we certainly have what we need- no more or no less. In Community and Growth, which it is important to bear in mind was written in 1979, Jean Vanier warns us of the dangers of having too much.

(Read from page 305 and 306.)

We, here at the Church of the Covenant, are trying to be faithful to the life that our inward journey and our outward journey teach us is the best life we can live in this, the 21st century. Our Old and New Testament Scriptures along with a host of

Christian mentors the likes of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jean Vanier. Thomas Keating, Elizabeth O'Conner, Thomas and Wendell Berry, Gordon Cosby, Elaine Prevallet, Mathew Fox, Michael Morwood instruct us as we journey as to how we, as followers of Jesus Christ, might live in the world and yet keep our core commitment to be builders of God's Kingdom which is not of this world. Every day new challenges must be faced and addressed. Until about 2002 all our church finances were kept in a checkbook. As a community we resisted buying a dishwasher and computerizing our bookkeeping system throughout the twentieth century. We are now living well into the 21st century. We have a dishwasher and have computerized our bookkeeping. Nevertheless, we are devoted trustees and stewards of the income that comes in to our care for our use as a community. This morning as we end one fiscal year and begin another, I invite you to focus with me on the money that is given over to the stewardship of the Church of the Covenant and distributed by the church for operating expenses and beyond our operation, to those in need.

I remember that when I was a teen-ager in the mid-twentieth century in First Presbyterian Church in Waynesboro, VA, Dr. Howard Gordon, my pastor, was an advocate for carrying no insurance. I was too young to know to even ask whether First Presbyterian Church carried insurance, but I do know that the Church of the Covenant carries insurance- both property and liability. We bear responsibility for all of our utilities and the maintenance and sometimes the improvement of our buildings and grounds. We decided to buy Pantops several years ago and are currently engaged in the last phase of its renovation, but there will be mortgage payments for thirteen years as well as maintenance as we go forward. We have four employees- our minister, our administrative assistant, our bookkeeper, and our cleaning person. We are so fortunate that, although all four are part-time, each is

devoted to the church and its work. Our programming is minimal. Our mission groups are, for the most part, financially self-sustaining and entail a lot of self-giving from their members but little expense on the church's part.

As we wrestle with these things, we must ask ourselves: How much should I have? As a church community we must ask ourselves: How much should we have? How much is enough? Our deep desire is to preserve community, to be a community of grace, “behaving in the world with frankness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God” as II Corinthians 1:12 expresses it, to put people first, to keep life simple, to be responsible to Mother Earth, not to use money to create more money or as a symbol of wealth or prestige, but to make sure that we are generous, that we share so that everyone has what they need. – to put to work any unrestricted monies rather than storing it up.

Communication is one area in which we admittedly are adjusting to the 21st century. We can use communication systems for the good of people. Our website is a good example; check it out sometime for most everything you would want to know about this church. Sometimes a personal visit is in order to bear news to our members. Letters and newsletters are also used from time to time. The telephone is considered by few not to be a necessity these days. It is fast being replaced by smartphones of an ever increasing generation. Computers are a recent arrival on the communication scene. Of course not everyone even in our own small community has free access to a computer or to a telephone. We try to be mindful of this and are ever trying to improve our system of getting all our words out to everyone, computer-literate or not!

The Church of the Covenant has buildings and grounds here at 4415 and at 4405 assessed at about \$500,000 against which we have mortgage debt of about

\$175,000. Our land and our buildings are well used by us and many others. I remember a time in the mid-sixties when things were tight, when we seriously worked with whether we were called to uproot and replant in downtown Lynchburg- maybe in a storefront. We were faced with exceeding smallness- membership, income and the like. We gave this Matthew passage a good workout: “those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” We knew then as we know now that this spot- this place- is a bountiful and precious gift secured by our founders for which we are now stewards. Most of us had then and have now an affinity for this place. Our roots are planted here and through this moment we continue to be called right here. We honor our stewardship, our trusteeship of this land and these buildings as well as all the gifts which come in to us. All of our gifts and those of good friends in our wider community are put straight to work. Except for a few designated gifts totaling about \$6,000, our income is real time income, day by day and week by week.

There is more to our financial life than operational expenses. We are committed to our Outward Giving. As an individual member, a Covenant member covenants to give of her or his resources at least a tenth- a tithe- for the work of this church. A Community member covenants to support the church with his or her financial resources as he or she is able. We have regular givers who are not formal members of the church. Some of them worship with on Sunday and some we seldom see. All together our church has what it needs. As a community of faith we aspire to give away more than a tenth of our Income, to missions and to those in need. We give to those that we have helped to birth like Interfaith Outreach Association, Meals on Wheels, L’Arche and The Haven. We give to other missions that need our help like the Society of St. Andrew, Bread for the World, Emergency Relief for hurricanes,

tornadoes, tsunamis, and the like. We give to the Comprehensive Rural Development Fund in Karanji, India and other global missions through the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ. Sometimes an individual has a need that we help them with. We have a section in our outward giving plan called Needs and Seeds for just such purposes- individuals, fledgling missions in need or the like. Fortunate indeed to own the church house and the Lodge along with the several acres on which they are planted, we aspire, as our mortgage on Pantops is paid down, to continue to increase our outward giving which for the fiscal year ending this week is about 13% of our \$120,000 budget. Each year we create an annual outward giving plan for the sharing out of our abundance. We aim to give the same priority to regular outward giving as we do to the electric and the water bill but occasionally there is not enough for all so we have a dilemma. So far we have been able to anticipate the short fall in time to let others know of the dilemma and the Lord has come through and provided. Right now is such a time. Things are often tight in the fall. Just this week we are having to schedule several payments in October which would normally have been paid in September, trusting that after the deposit from today's offerings, there will be enough. In varying degrees, at varying times our Covenant membership which bears ultimate responsibility for steering our community wrestles with keeping a proper balance so that we are not afraid of swimming upstream sometimes, not afraid to take Scripture seriously and that we remain aware that we dwell in an alternative culture which often flows over and against the standards of the world.

Vince Sawyer has reminded us of our abundance more than once at times when we were becoming anxious about our church finances. You may know that Vince was once Executive Director of The Gateway. Here are his Thoughts on Stewardship: "In response to Dolly's request for my sharing about how I have worked with the

idea of our God being a “God of abundance”, I remembered how much I struggled with exactly that idea during my 9 years at The Gateway. Those years felt like being on a roller coaster ride when it came to our finances. Lean years when we cut staff and then a large gift would arrive, followed by more lean years.

One week in September 1996 the theme of the lectionary readings was “God’s Economy”, and the Old Testament reading told the story of the “Manna and Quail” from the 16th Chapter of Exodus. That week I found working with that particular passage of scripture to be both pertinent and helpful. What it said to me was that God provides everything we need, one day at a time. If we try to gather more than we need, it spoils and goes bad, contaminating what we have “stored up”. We’re not to worry ourselves about what God may provide us with next week, next month, or next year, hoarding and storing up what we do not currently need; but we can rest assured that God will provide everything we do need, no more and no less.

Vince continues:

The part about “not worrying” for me has been easier said than done. But Matthew 6: 25-34, Luke 12: 22-34, and Philippians 4: 6 all make it clear that we are “to be not anxious” about anything. As for me, I have to work consistently with the words of Jesus and the Apostle Paul found in those scriptures if I am to have any hope of being in an “unworried” state.

How does this relate to how we at the Church of the Covenant work with our church finances, and especially with our Outward Giving? I think we need to realize that we as a community are “rich” since our God is one of abundance, and

we can be generous with our Outward Giving, always trusting that God will provide the financial resources we need, no more and no less.”

Many thanks to Vince for his inspiring words.

Our world is so oriented to the concept of scarcity, but we are in the world and not of the world. One who is filled with the spirit of Jesus Christ knows abundance. Part of our inward journey work each day is to be reminded that our God is a God of abundance. As a community we remember

The abundant gift of this place

The abundant gift of our history

The abundant gift of community

The abundant gift of each other

The abundant gift of the sharing that takes place among us- of our faith, of each others' care, of our resources. We were reminded of our abundance in the reading from

[Psalm 104 \(1, 5, 13-16, 20-21, 24, 27-31a\)](#)

[The earth is filled with the glory of God!](#) Immersing ourselves in nature reminds us. A leisurely walk through these forty acres surrounding us reminds us. Living in the present moment reminds us. Just being in the presence of a child reminds us. Experiencing the Friendship Circle at Camp Kum-Ba-Yah reminds us. Our mission group meetings remind us. Our worship reminds us.

I began by speaking of our silent retreat next Saturday. On next Sunday morning members will formally make their commitments to Covenant and Community membership and the beginning of a new church year.

Whatever the level of your involvement and commitment to the Church of the

Covenant, please know that you are welcomed, valued, and celebrated. This is a Season of Celebration- the celebration of our founding fifty-eight years ago, the celebration of recommitment, the celebration of abundance and of our life together. Jean Vanier expresses it this way in Community and Growth: “..... Celebration is nourishment and resource. It makes present the goals of community in symbolic form, and so brings hope and a new strength to take up again everyday life with more love.” Each time we gather our mutual hope, our mutual strength and our Spirit is renewed. Praise God for each of you as we continue the journey together.