

“Give and Take”
Preached by Rev. Carol Reynolds
First Congregational Church, UCC, Cadillac, MI

2 Corinthians 8:7-15 Sermon
July 1, 2012
For Private Distribution Only

If today’s passage from 2 Corinthians sounds a little like a stewardship pitch to you, you’re right. It is. If it seems rather early to be talking about stewardship, you’re right about that too. Last year we didn’t broach the subject until a bit late, November or December. However, I found it interesting that this text popped up in the lectionary just as our new Stewardship Committee begins work in preparation for 2013 and has invited us to become creative in our search for ideas to bridge the gap in our 2012 budget. Right smack dab in the middle of our fiscal year, it absolutely makes sense that we would be assessing our situation right about now.

Now I realize that for many, if not all, of us, money is an uncomfortable topic, something we’ll try to avoid at all costs. I’m with you on that, but I’d like to encourage us to reframe our thinking in a couple of ways. First, let’s understand that, when we talk about money in a church context, what we’re really talking about are ministries. Like this building and everything in it, money is a means to the end of doing ministry. Just as higher taxes enable our government to fund more services, a bigger budget enables our church to do more ministry. That’s the bottom line, but not the only one. The deeper one is theological: Directly or indirectly, everything we have and are is given to us by God, and so an overflowing of gratitude is both a natural and an appropriate response. Our offerings could be likened to thank-you notes, but the reality is that we’re just returning a portion of what God first gave to us.

I know and appreciate the fact that many of us are already giving faithfully and as much as—or, in some cases, even more than—our means permit. I recognize that many here are retired and subsisting on modest fixed incomes. And, truth be told, it’s not money per se that I want to

discuss today. Paul may have engaged the Corinthians in some hardcore persuasion around their mission dollars, but I'd like us to consider a broader interpretation of stewardship. We are stewards over so much more than our wallets. In the book of Genesis, God declares humanity the stewards and caretakers of all creation! Between that charge and Jesus' command to us to love our neighbors as ourselves, we've got a pretty strong case for engaging in mission within and beyond these church walls. Maybe even beyond our species! But we also have a responsibility to be good stewards of our selves; that is, the love, time, energy, and talents with which God has endowed each one of us during our time on this earth.

So many of you are known for the work you do and have done on behalf of the Cadillac community. And, in the words of Martha Stewart, that's a good thing, a very good thing, in fact... What I wonder is whether we could bring some more of that energy and intention to our shared lives and mission here as church. I've seen that happen with our Open and Affirming process: Quite frankly, I've been thrilled with the commitment many of you have demonstrated. At our last film night, there was a great deal of passion in the air as people began to speak boldly of our need to go further than quietly covenanting to become an official Open and Affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ. There was a dawning recognition that, for attitudes toward Cadillac's LGBT community to shift in a substantive way, we just might need to stick our necks out and speak out more publicly, to support and vote for candidates who represent our values, and maybe even to run for those offices ourselves... It was exciting to be a part of this dialogue. As much energy as our task force has invested in this education process, what I observed last Friday night was that energy and commitment broadening and multiplying. Because that's what happens when we come together and engage the ministry God calls us to do: First we are equipped to do it. And then we get back even more than we gave in the first place.

Being good stewards of our resources as a church requires us to prioritize and to focus. We're a small congregation. We can't do it all. God doesn't expect us to. But the upshot is that we need to choose wisely. What are the needs we see around us? Where will our time and energy have the greatest impact? What do we discern God is calling us to do? Does it expand upon something we're already doing? Or is it something totally new and different? Can we fully open our hearts and our minds as together we wait and listen for God's still, small, Stillspeaking voice?

We have a great location here. We have a beautiful facility. How shall we use these tremendous assets to invest in God's upside down economy? We have more and more groups meeting here whose missions are part of our own: Transition Cadillac, a Course in Miracles, GALLEY--Gay and Lesbian Locally Empowered Youth. We've also talked about founding and hosting a chapter of PFLAG--Parents, Friends, and Families of Lesbians and Gays--here. Extending hospitality to groups like these is energizing and uplifting. It's a privilege for us to be able to do it. But I wonder: Is there anyone we're forgetting? For instance, Jesus talked a great deal about the poor and the hungry. We've got a lot of great cooks here, male and female. Whenever we gather together to eat, there is almost always way too much food to go around. Yes, we can and often do send the leftovers to OASIS or the New Hope Shelter. But what might it look like if we were to invite our neighbors into our church home to sit down beside us in Fellowship Hall and dine with us? It was Jesus' specialty, and I daresay it's ours as well. It's called table communion.

Another precious asset I'd like to draw our attention to is our children. We may not have as many as some other churches do, but they are the future of our church, and they contribute more than their share of energy and enthusiasm to our faith community. How can we invest in them?

When they are baptized, we promise to love, support, and care for them. We do all of those things, yes. But, in this church setting, probably the single biggest thing we are called to do is to provide for their spiritual formation, so that, when they reach their early teen years, they're prepared to articulate their beliefs and to make an informed decision about whether to be confirmed and join the church. We do this through Christian education, by including them in worship and other aspects of our church's life, and by modeling faithful living; that is, demonstrating how our beliefs inform the ways we spend our time, energy, and talents. Some might argue that our tasks here are simply to be a loving community and to provide some ethical teachings and models to our kids. But, like stewardship, it's more than that: What is the basis for our values and ethics? How do we make meaning of our living and our dying? What are the traditions and spiritual practices that have helped people do this in the past? How do we and others experience and interact with the divine, something bigger than ourselves? How do we respond to those interactions? These are all matters of spiritual formation, which distinguish the church from public school or a secular community center.

At this moment, we don't have anyone to teach our children next year. Not only have we been blessed with a lot of good cooks at First Congregational, Cadillac, we also have an abundance of educators, community leaders, and people who are good with kids. If our children are the potential future of our progressive Christian faith, then teaching them is a gift that keeps on giving. Think about it. They are both an asset and a mission right under this roof. They are deserving of our hospitality too.

Although we tend to think of our small size as a drawback, this, too, I would encourage us to reframe. For our size, we have an abundance of talent and, with so many young retirees, I

daresay a bit of time and energy to spare as well. Because we are small and congregational, we don't have a lot of bureaucracy. We can be nimble and flexible. We can respond to needs without having to pass the decision through our denomination, a bishop, or multiple layers of church boards and committees. We have a great deal of freedom. This is a tremendous gift. We simply need to free ourselves to dream and to trust in God's abundance. Many of us were raised in less than affluent homes, and, as a result, we can tend to function from places of scarcity and fear. But we need to know that poverty, scarcity, and fear are not of God and begin to release ourselves from their clutches. As Paul says to the Corinthians, "Nothing left over to the one with the most, Nothing lacking to the one with the least."¹ One way or another, with God there is enough.

A friend recently forwarded me a remarkable true story from the Huffington Post: For 30 years a group of West Tennessee women known as "The 9 Nanas" joined in a mission to create happiness. Ranging in age from 54 to 72, the women hatched a scheme to anonymously help people in their community. They began by tracking local obituaries and secretly delivering their homemade pound cakes to the bereaved families' homes. Then they eavesdropped around town to pinpoint people who might be in need of a little help or cheering up and sent them care packages with notes saying, "Somebody loves you." They squirreled away small sums of money, clipped coupons, and accumulated S&H green stamps to raise funds and materials for their mission. Now they were able to drive around poorer neighborhoods identifying homes without air conditioning and darkened houses where the electricity had probably been cut off. The Nanas' reserves enabled them to drop off utility money, air conditioners, and pound cake undetected in the middle of the night...

¹ The Message paraphrase translation

For 30 years they kept this mission secret from even their husbands, until one finally happened to notice the extra mileage on the family car and the increasingly large withdrawals from their savings account. Anxiously the women gathered to explain to their husbands what they'd been up to all those years. Much to their surprise and delight, the men were eager to help. Eventually they told their adult children as well, who urged them to sell their pound cakes online to bring in even more money to finance the cause. Eventually the Nanas were up to 100 orders a day and able to hire a "happiness coordinator" to identify even more needs.² In 2011 they donated over \$44,000 toward rent, car payments, children's clothing and more.³ In the last 35 years, the 9 Nanas have contributed nearly \$900,000 to their local community.⁴ Look what a few bodies, a worthy mission, good stewardship, and a little creativity can do!

I would never suggest that we ignore our financial situation. What I will say is that if we have clarity about our gifts and our mission, if we are committed to that mission and unified around it, the energy and the money will come. And eventually the people too. I doubt that this will ever be a mega church, and I doubt that we'd want that anyway. In many respects small is a gift. Small is a family.

So let us be a family with a legacy and a future. Let us be a family that dares to walk and talk its talk. And let us be a beacon in our living out of God's radical love and hospitality upon this hill and beyond.

Amen.

² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/20/it-aint-over-the-business-secret_n_1607385.html

³ <http://www.happiness-happens.com/sitebuildercontent/sitebuilderfiles/FactSheet.pdf>

⁴ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/20/it-aint-over-the-business-secret_n_1607385.html