

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
November 8, 2009
Stewardship Sunday
2 Corinthians 9:6-12

“Give Until It Feels Good”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

I had just about finished writing my Stewardship Sunday sermon—a tidy little piece that managed to talk about why YOU should give generously to the Haydenville Church without ever mentioning the word money—when I sat down in our living room to take a breather and read the *Gazette*. I picked up the paper and this innocent looking insert, tucked neatly into every newspaper in the city, fluttered out from between the pages and settled on my lap. “What’s this?” I thought, and I read it. The flyer said:

FREE EDUCATIONAL AND INFORMATIONAL SEMINAR
Protecting You, Your Family and Your Assets in Troubling Economic Times

Oh great, I thought, feeling very defeated. It’s an omen.
Stewardship Sunday is THIS Sunday.
We’re trying to raise \$100,000 in a small Hilltown Church.
And we’re in a Recession.
A full-out, no-nonsense, everybody-knows-it, everybody-feels-it RECESSION.
We are a church full of love, grace, song, Spirit and prayer FOR SURE. But we’re not the richest church on the planet and we are in a RECESSION and this is Stewardship Sunday.

I sat in my living room chair thinking OH GREAT.
We’re in a recession and I have to preach on giving MONEY to the Church without ever saying the word MONEY and nobody has any of the MONEY I am not supposed to talk about and I am supposed to convince people that giving to the Church is a spiritual practice that makes sense and invigorates their spiritual journey and we’re in a RECESSION.

I held the newspaper insert and thought: the sermon I have written for Sunday, my sermon that is almost done, my Stewardship Sunday sermon is all wrong.

This flyer is an omen.

I have to confront the fact that we are in a RECESSION and yet we still need to raise \$100,000 in this precious but not-too-rich Church.

I have to speak about the recession.

Then, as I sat there sulking realizing that my almost-finished Stewardship Sunday sermon was all wrong, I had this epiphany....

YES we are in a recession—

Disposable income is in short supply—

Money is tight—

Jobs are hard to find—

The news is filled with depressing stories daily—

We are without question in a financial recession.

BUT as people of faith we know that MANY MORE THINGS, many more IMPORTANT things are NOT in recession...

The love of God for all God's people is NOT in recession.

The feeling of community and belonging in this church family is NOT in recession.

The ability of people to be generous with what they do have is NOT in recession.

The need for this beloved community of faith is NOT in recession.

The commitment of our church members and friends to help one another through hard times and losses is NOT in recession.

The sense that the Holy Spirit is gusting through this place is NOT in recession.

And the desire to be faithful to the call to be contemporary disciples of the radical, loving, welcoming, inclusive, peace-loving, healing, counter-cultural Jesus is NOT in recession.

This country may be in a FINANCIAL recession,

But as people of faith we know that the gifts of the spirit are NOT in recession.

Praise God.

YES we are deep into our Stewardship Campaign when we are deep into a financial recession that is, apparently, a global phenomenon.

And YES this little flyer that snuck out of the pages of our local paper reminded me of the “troubling economic times” we face today.

But I am choosing to remember what is not in recession and to believe that the people of God can and will find a way to raise the modest budget that keeps this extraordinary faith community alive.

I am choosing to believe that our little church family will do exactly what people across the country did during the Great Depression of the 1930s—they gave MORE money away. That is true. The greatest giving in the history of this country was during the Great Depression.

I am choosing to believe in the simple words written on the currency found in our wallets: “In God we trust.” It truly is IN GOD that we trust. Not in dire predictions, not in advice about belt-tightening measures, not in flyers that stir up anxiety about “troubling economic times.” It is in God that we trust and in God that we find our meaning and our hope.

The flyer that made me rewrite this Stewardship Sunday sermon offers a “free educational seminar” called *Protecting You, Your Family and Your Assets in Troubling Economic Times*. But I don’t want to protect my assets....I want to give them away, I want to share them, I want to spend them. For it is the feeling of abundance and generosity that will help me through these scary times.

I don’t want to protect my assets I want to use them to create community, help those in need and serve God.

I don’t want to protect my assets, I want to protect my church, I want to protect that homeless woman in front of Brueger’s Bagel Deli downtown, I want to protect our Children’s Church program, I want to protect our shared commitment to peace and justice, I want to protect our most vulnerable church members, I want to protect the home of the family in our congregation threatened with foreclosure. I don’t want to protect my assets, I want to protect this community of faith.

Friends, I believe we can reach our Stewardship goal of \$100,000 even in a recession. I believe we will find a way even though all financial indicators say things are bad, not getting better, and people have no money to contribute to anything. I believe we will make a way out of no way. I believe we will experience a sense of abundance during this Stewardship Campaign that will fuel us and deepen our commitment to this Church, to each other, and to God.

AND not only do I think we WILL reach our goal, even in this recession, but I think we can do it happily and cheerfully. In fact, I don’t want anyone to give one dollar to this Church that they cannot give happily. If you feel pressured, if you feel badly about your pledge to the Church, don’t give it.

I want us to raise the goal we have set for ourselves with joy in our hearts even in this recession. I want us to give joyfully so that our pledges are made with delight.

Our Scripture reading for today speaks to this very approach.

*The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly,
and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.*

*Each of you must give as you have made up your mind,
not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.*

*And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance,
so that by always having enough of everything,
you may share abundantly in every good work.*

As it is written,

*'He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor;
his righteousness* endures for ever.'*

¹⁰*He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply
your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.*

*You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity,
which will produce thanksgiving to God through us;
for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints
but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.*

Not only do I believe we can reach our goal in this Stewardship campaign, but I believe we can do it with more delight and trust, cheerfulness and confidence than in years past when this country was not in a recession.

I believe that because we are people of faith, we are God's sons and daughters, we are in the business of hope, we believe in what's possible, we do not dwell in dire predictions, we are the bearers of good news.

How often have I stood at the altar on Communion Sundays and said to you,
Come to this table not because you must but because you may.

Well this Stewardship Sunday I am saying to you: make your pledge to our Church this year not because you must but because you may.

Stewardship is about belonging, being named and claimed by a faith community that calls you one of their own.

Give this year not because you must but because you may.

Listen now to this passage from the book FULL DISCLOSURE: EVERYTHING THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT FINANCIAL GIVING:

The story is told of a famous opera singer who had just given an outstanding matinee performance. When fans gathered to offer congratulations backstage, one of them said, "I see by the program that you have to give another performance tonight." "No," said the singer. "I don't have to give another performance tonight." "But it says right here on the program that you have an eight o'clock performance this evening," the fan said. "I do have a performance tonight," the singer replied, "But I don't have to give it. I get to give it."

I have my red envelope right here. In it are MY pledge materials to make my promise of my gift to the church for next year. I don't have to contribute. I GET to contribute.

And I want to tell you about my contribution.

If the raise in my salary the Trustees have proposed for the new fiscal year is approved in 2010, then I will bring home (not gross, but net) \$40,000 next year. Ann Loomis, our Church Treasurer, tells me \$40,000 will be my take-home pay next year, if I get the proposed raise.

And so, I say to myself, I GET to give a portion of that \$40,000 to this Church that I love. Praise God.

In years past, I have given 8% of my income to the Church and will continue that tradition next year.

So when I complete the pledge form in this red envelope...I will be making a promise, a pledge, to contribute \$3,200 to this church during 2010—

Or about \$62 per week when I tuck my check into my offering envelope every week.

What a bargain.

For \$62 a week I get a community of faith that prays, sings, struggles, laughs, and cries together.

For \$62 a week I get to hang out with a hearty band of believers that shows up for Bible Study and Ladies Aid, Thursday Morning Prayers and Fridays at Four, Loose Ends and Choir Practice, the Church Fair and the Cookie Walk, Living the Questions and the Nonviolence Study Group.

For \$62 a week I get to grapple with Scripture readings with a really smart bunch of seekers who listen to the Word and then talk together about what they think and feel.

For \$62 a week I am surrounded by angels who pray for me and minister to me when, without warning, I land in the local hospital with emergency abdominal surgery.

I am happy to pledge \$3200 to this church for next year.
If I made more I'd pledge more.

And so I ask you to join me in giving to this quite remarkable, very spunky, somewhat feisty, always hilarious, deeply faithful, Spirit-filled, open and affirming community of faith.

Give generously.
But my beloved brothers and sisters, don't give until it hurts.
Give until it feels good....really, really good.

Amen.

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