

“STEWARDSHIP CONNECTIONS: VISION”

Psalm 33:1, 13-22; Luke 18:9-14

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There are many ways to pray: With words, of course – eloquent or simple, thoughtfully crafted or spontaneous, alone or in company. In music. With a physical gesture like kneeling or lighting a candle. In that wordless reaching out which is sometimes a desperate plea for a miracle and sometimes just awestruck gratitude. With actions that express caring or hope or a desire for change. Your vote is a kind of prayer. So is your donation to a good cause, or showing up to volunteer. Planting a tree, making a friend, taking up a new responsibility – any of those things can be a prayer. Prayer can also take the form of silence, listening, or waiting – because prayer is connection and relationship, and to have genuine relationship, genuine connection, you have to make some space for the other and you have to allow that you can't control or predict exactly what will happen – no matter how you pray.

No matter how you pray, the form your prayer takes isn't as important as the spirit in which your prayer is offered. That seems pretty clear from this story Jesus told about two men who went to the temple to pray.

The first man is a member of a religious group considered very respectable, upright, and devout. I'm not quite sure what we are to make of his motives or intentions or beliefs. Does he harbor the notion that he can impress God or manipulate God? Or is he just showing off his religiosity and respectability?

Jesus has simply but very effectively described a character whose inward attitude is wildly at odds with his outward practice of religion. The man's words are in the form of a prayer, but really what he says doesn't feel like a prayer at all, does it? It almost seems like he's trying to suggest that God is lucky to have him! It's a prayer that doesn't go anywhere. It isn't in any way a "reaching out" or a "making space." He says "I thank you, God," but we don't quite believe in his gratitude, do we? His 'thankfulness' is mainly self-congratulation. There's no true appreciation for help he may have received along the way from God, or from his family or his community. There's no awareness of his own failings. He makes no connection between his own privileged life and how the way he lives might affect others. There's no connection with neighbors, or with his faith community – not even with the man praying right next to him, who is nothing more to him than an object of comparison. Even his giving – which would be deemed generous by some standards – doesn't flow from gratitude to God, or care for others, or love of his community, or a commitment to a mission, but is simply the ticking off of a legalistic box. This is the picture of someone who is pretty sure he's got it all figured out.

A person like this is often admired, envied, respected, thanked, listened to – within any community or congregation – but Jesus sees things differently. Those qualities that are so

impressive to others aren't what matters to him. What's more important is the *spirit* in which we come to God, and the *spirit* in which we regard our sisters and brothers. Jesus' parable is clearly directed at anybody – and it could be any of us, couldn't it? – who becomes so convinced of their own goodness that they forget their dependence of God and look down on others with contempt. So it's not surprising that he has less to say about the other character in the story. We only hear that the man doesn't seek attention, and that his prayer reveals awareness of both his failings and his need for God. But that's a real prayer. It's offered with humility and without excuses or self-promotion. It suggests a reaching out beyond himself for genuine connection... at least with God. And connection with God usually leads to connection with others.

Over the past month, we've been thinking about how stewardship is all about making connections – in other words, about understanding that the life of faith is about relationships – how we relate to God, to our neighbors, to the earth, to our community, and to the resources of various kinds at our disposal. Today, on Stewardship Sunday, as we think about what it means to give, and in particular to give to and through the ministry of the church, that awareness of right relationship is key. We give, not to impress anyone, not to curry favor with God, not to gain influence or for the sake of comparing ourselves with others, not even to prove to *ourselves* that we are good people, but because of a connection.

We give because we love this faith community. Because we care about each other, and we want to encourage and help one another. Because in worship and in conversation, we are moved and challenged, and we grow in our faith. We give because we believe in the church's future and because we are personally invested in the vision we are developing together as a faith community. We give because we are committed to the Matthew 25 priorities. We give because truth and justice and respect for all God's children matter to us. We give because we feel this push to keep engaging the world and the issues of our day from the perspective of faith. We give because we resonate deeply with the core values we've named: Inspiring Worship, Compassionate Service, Art & Music, Mind & Spirit, Earth Care. We give because we want the church to be here to comfort the grieving, feed the hungry, baptize children, tell the stories of Jesus, help us wrestle with tough decisions, welcome folks who need a community... and so much more.

I'm sure the Stewardship Committee would prefer that I not say it doesn't matter how much you give! ☺ But in fact, in some ways it really doesn't. The spirit and the connection that motivates your giving is of more lasting value than any number of dollars. It's the giving of yourself - in whatever ways you can – to the ministry we do here together that makes the most difference, no matter whether you are able to make a large financial contribution or a small one.

Your giving to the church's ministry – and your financial commitment for the coming year, if you chose to make one – is a kind of prayer. A prayer for the health and strength of our community. A prayer for those who will have special need of the church's caring in the months ahead. A prayer for our leaders. A prayer for those who God will call to join us. A prayer for

the ability to help others. A prayer of gratitude for music and art that move us. A prayer of thanks for ways to serve and grow.

I hope that we offer those prayers – our commitments, our intentions, our hopes – in a spirit of humility and openness. I hope that we recognize the ways we have fallen – and continue to fall short of what God would want for us. I hope that we are ready to acknowledge at every moment that we need God’s help and guidance - and mercy, because we are bound to mess up some of the time.

I have to say I am moved and encouraged by what I see happening in our congregation right now. Wise and committed leaders. New participants and new relationships. New visions emerging. Real conversations. Energy for mission and a passion for justice. Growth in spirituality and prayer. Joy in worship. Care for one another. Willingness to embrace new ways of thinking about what it means to be church. This is an exciting (if slightly overwhelming!) time to be your pastors!

But what feels perhaps most important to me about where we are right now is a lesson we’ve learned over these past two and a half years: that we don’t know what will happen next. Jerry mentioned recently that, while we used to sometimes talk about a five-year, or a ten-year, plan for the church, we wouldn’t dream of doing that now. It took a pandemic to show us that we don’t have that much foresight or control. Something is always changing – in the world around us, in the church, in the needs we and others have – and our calling, as we try to follow Jesus together, is to be ready and willing to adapt, and respond as faithfully as we can. This isn’t a calling for people who think they have everything all figured out. What it does ask of us is a certain amount of humility as well as a whole lot of flexibility ... and the desire for genuine, vital connection with God, one another, the earth, and all our neighbors that is the foundation of stewardship. Amen.