

The tribal wisdom of the Lakota People, passed on from generation to generation, says that, "When you discover that you are riding a dead horse, the best strategy is to dismount." Makes a lot of sense.... In our modern ways however, guided by experts and consultants, we have identified other, so called, "advanced strategies" for dealing with dead horses, such as:

Use a stronger whip.

Appoint a committee to study the horse.

Visit other countries to see how they ride horses.

Lower the standards so that dead horses can be included.

Reclassify the dead horse as living-impaired.

Hire outside contractors to ride the dead horse.

Harness several dead horses together to increase speed.

Conduct a productivity study to see if lighter riders would improve the dead horse's performance.

And maybe my favorite...

Promote the dead horse to a supervisory position!

There are people who say that preaching on stewardship is like trying to ride a Dead Horse but let me tell you, here at Oakland Avenue, as we pay attention to stewardship we are riding no dead horse!

Stewardship is no dead horse!

Stewardship is not fundraising because it concerns the entirety of our lives.

Stewardship is everything we do after we say we believe.

Stewardship is the implication of declaring our trust and faith in Jesus Christ.

Stewardship is about every decision, every action, every thought, every deed, every choice, every priority not as a burden but as a joyous response to the love and grace of God and the needs of God's world, and all of our sisters and brothers.

My friends Stewardship is our witness!

Our Stewardship is our witness to who God is, to all that God means to us, and to all that God has done for all of us in our Lord and Savior.

Our Stewardship is NOT our response to the claims nor the personality of a preacher; nor to the slickness nor effectiveness of a campaign; nor a measure of what we think about anything or everything our denomination or our Presbytery or even our own congregation is doing or not doing.

Our Stewardship is a measure of who we know God is and what God asks us to do with our lives.

I do hope you have been using our "Inspiring Portraits" Devotional Booklet. In Scripture, reflection and prayer we have been reminded of all that God has done for us and all that God expects of us. God has entrusted you and me, all of us with the Good news of Love and Hope, the very power of God to change

our lives and usher in the Kingdom of God. All of us are called to serve the King of Kings, by sharing the Good News with others, wholly, fully and entirely, without regard for our own place in these proceedings, without thinking if we will be honored or rewarded in any way. As a witness what matters is not how people view us but how fully people see, receive and accept God's good news for themselves.

As witnesses for God we must 'walk worthy of God'. Paul uses the word 'walk' as a word for 'behavior', one of the standard uses of the equivalent Hebrew word. Behavior is a matter of putting one foot in front of another; good behavior is taking care with the direction and placing of those feet, with the direction those steps will take us, the urgency and passion with which we move – all towards expressing everything it means to be witnesses to God.

Today's Gospel passage addresses what it means to walk the talk. Jesus tells the crowd that the Pharisees really know what they are talking about! Their witness fails because they have trouble living into all that good preaching. Jesus states that there is a disconnect, a severe, major, fatal disconnect, between what they know and teach and how they live.

As witnesses together in Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church our calling is to live and share as interdependent disciples living and growing within a covenanted community of faith. Interdependent not independent!

As witnesses our baptism holds us accountable to God's priorities, our baptism gives us our true identity and marks out the purpose of our living.

As witnesses we are to engage in lifting burdens in the church. Just as the muscles in our body will not develop properly or will atrophy unless they carry weight regularly, so we must be quick and determined to carry our burdens, and yes, to carry the burdens of others. Some of the burdens we face are just that - burdens - but some of the burdens that we feel we face are in actual fact healthy weight-bearing exercises which can help us to grow as witnesses to God – dedicated, determined, dependable.

Over this past year you have given and shared and contributed in many different ways to share the burdens of others.

You have extended substantial support to those affected by natural disasters in buckets and baby clothes for PDA;

Last Sunday you walked and sponsored in support of Crop Walk – we rejoice Peyton Drake walked as part of the group once again this year along with other members of our church including many of our youth;

In Chicago and at the Duvall Home in Florida our youth have served and learned;

You have welcomed families into the life of this family through STAR and Family Promise;

You have given aid and shelter to others through HOPE;
You have partnered with our Mission Partners across the world – you have prayed for them and supported them in practical ways;
You have engaged with Winthrop students and others through campus ministry;
You have sought training as Stephen Ministers and worked through DeaconCare to minister God's comfort to others;
You have taught Bible at Circle and VBS to adults and youth and children; you have joined together with other OAPC members to share life and faith and fellowship.
None of this was a burden – at least I hope it was not a burden, because God loves a cheerful giver - all of this was a joy, at the same time – it was weight-bearing, muscle-producing faith exercise.

Next Sunday and over the coming year, as you make your pledge of your financial offerings, and as you make your offering faithfully and regularly and fully, as you give to God from the first of your fruits, the cream of your crops, as you make your tithes and your offering a top priority this too is no burden but a joy, a weight-bearing, muscle-producing, healthy faith exercise.

There is a quotation often repeated, in different versions and so it is unclear exactly who may have first used it. It says, "There is no end to the good we can do as long as we don't care who gets the credit."

As witnesses it is never about us – it is about partnering together with each other, putting God's plans into action.

As witnesses to God and to God's love - we reject turf wars, prideful authority, and any kind of elitism.

As witnesses - we choose the better, richer, purer way, sharing all the gifts with which God has blessed us.

As witnesses - our activity must be visible, but it must never be done for the sake of making it visible.

As witnesses - we must reject hypocrisy – which I define as what happens when any of us become much more concerned about how other people are living their lives than we are about living our own lives.

Jesus joined in the long prophetic tradition of denouncing those who attempted to place themselves above others. In an eerie parallel to some contemporary events, throughout biblical history, whenever a minority elevated itself to the detriment of the majority, God sent forth words of warning and condemnation.

Whenever the 1% lorded it over the rest, God had something to say. Archaeologists working in the Holy Land have identified periods when people's homes were all basically the same size, in those times the prophets were generally silent. In other eras, excavations have revealed remains of massive houses and small shacks side by side, coincidentally when the passionate ministry of prophets such as Micah, Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah occurred, thundering against the injustices perpetrated among God's people.

As witnesses we are asked to stand against unbridled consumption, and its cousin's selfishness and greed. There are times when we should say no! To ourselves, to our children, to the latest fad, to the newest toy!

As witnesses we are invited to show our willingness to trust God's provision for us by being ready to give and share, rather than hoard.

As witnesses we are freed to give a fitting, realistic, generous, sacrificial proportion of our time, talent and treasure for God's work through the ministry and mission of our church.

As witnesses God needs to have a say in how we spend and allocate all the resources with which we are blessed. \$3,710 is the figure, according to an interesting report in TIME Magazine; \$3,710 is what the average adult American spends every month on goods and services. This chart breaks out this \$3,710 ... it makes interesting reading and maybe the most interesting thing is that nowhere, nowhere among this monthly expenditure, per adult of \$3,710 does an amount appear for church or charitable giving!

We ought to be heartened and encouraged by the news Jim Williford shared with us last Sunday, that 100% of the members of Session, Finance and Stewardship Committees have already submitted their pledges and from these 37 or so individuals and families pledges were received of right at \$200,000 – just shy of one fifth of the total required to meet the Pledge Target of \$1,050,00. The average monthly pledge of this leadership group is some \$440, or \$5,320 annually. There are probably a number of different reactions to such information – some may be encouraged, surprised, shocked, delighted.

To be God's witnesses all of us are asked to commit an increasing percentage of our income each year to God's work through our church. Some people ask their pastor is it a percentage of our gross or our net income. In many ways it does not matter, choose one of these or choose your Adjusted Gross Income or your Taxable Income on last year's Tax Return and commit to giving a growing percentage each year and together we will be demonstrate our seriousness in being God's witnesses.

There is an old story about a Scotsman who took his Chocolate Labrador to the vet. "Doctor," he said sadly, "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to cut off my dog's tail." The vet stepped back, "Why should I do such a terrible thing?" "Because my mother-in-law's arriving tomorrow, and I don't want anything to make her think she's welcome."

We are here today, we are gathered for worship, because we wish to witness to these truths: God is welcome here – indeed God welcomes us here. God is welcome in our lives - God is welcome in the life of our Church. Truth be told it is really us who are welcomed by God, because in Jesus God has given life to each and all of us as a gift to be treasured, lived, shared to the full. As witnesses we must do what it takes so that we can wag our tails in welcome – wagging not to draw attention to ourselves – but wagging

in welcome to God, to one another, to all who will come to share in the life of our church and to all who need our help and friendship.

Next Sunday as you make your pledge accept the challenge of being witnesses for God and for God's presence in your life, in the life of this church and in the life of this community. Next Sunday, come with your completed pledge card and come forward to place it on the Communion Table with your tails wagging – in welcome to God and in welcome to all that God calls us to do and be. Get ready to paint and describe and create a larger, more intricate, more detailed portrait of ministry, on a larger canvas. God asks us to dedicate a growing, and a reasonable and a faithful portion of our means for God's work through our congregation – this is part of our Witness to Jesus Christ.

On Thursday I was honored to attend the Roast in Honor of OAPC Member Robert “Bob” Hope, long-time servant in our community. While there a woman came up to speak to me to tell me that she always sees our Service on CN2 on a Sunday evening and how she appreciated that rather than all the churches that scream and shout, we bear witness to the love of God. Hearing her say that does not have a church home I invited her here, to join with us. We are not riding a dead horse, we are uniting with the loving purposes of God, in the work to which God is calling us.

The benefits of technology include the ability for someone who was present at the 8:45 Service to send an email between Services – and Clarke Moore did just this this morning. His email says, “I dropped by my office after early worship, parked the car, and right next to me was another car with a window sticker on it - "Bark less, wag more". That must be some kind of a sign about your message this morning!

I hope so! “Bark less, wag more” great advice as we prepare to make our commitment as cheerful givers next Sunday, wagging our tails! Amen.