

“It’s About Money”

Scripture: I Corinthians 4:1-2; 6-7

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Thank God for messy congregations where people divide up into multiple factions and get really upset at each other. Thank God for congregations who get into an uproar! Why? Some of the best writing of the apostle Paul—writing that became our Bible—arises because of a messy congregation in a place called Corinth. In Corinth, people were in an uproar. Some were saying, “I am on the side of Paul.” Others were saying, “I am on the side of Apollos” (another well-respected Christian teacher in Paul’s day). Others were saying, “I am on the side of Peter” (Jesus’ right hand man). Then, of course, there were those who say, “I am on the side of Christ.” There were probably folks that took no side at all and just shook their head at all the squabbling.

In the section of Paul’s letter that we are going to read today, Paul is addressing the divisions particularly associated with his name and with Apollos. Paul addresses that church in Corinth with a reminder about individual faithfulness: each of us is a servant of Christ (servants are not the boss) and each of us are stewards (stewards are those that hold something that is not their own). Listen now to 1 Corinthians 4:1-2, 6-7:

**4** Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy...<sup>6</sup> I have applied all this to Apollos and myself for your benefit, brothers and sisters, so that you may learn through us the meaning of the saying, “Nothing beyond what is written,” so that none of you will be puffed up in favor of one against another.<sup>7</sup> For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?

Paul’s response to the division in Corinth is to say, it is not about winning an argument about whose side is right. It is about each one being faithful in your service and stewardship of God’s love and grace. Paul says the first priority is not about what others are doing but about your own trustworthiness before God. How easy it is to get caught up and depend on what others do. How easy it is to let someone else be faithful for us.

There is the story of a small French village deciding to honor a beloved doctor who had served the village for 50 years. Remember this was a French village, so here was the idea: each of the 100 or so village households would bring a bottle of their best wine to the celebration. Each of these bottles would be added to a wine barrel or cask that would be given to the good doctor. This wine would be the best of the best. Each household brought their bottle; each was added to the cask; and the cask was presented to the doctor. After the celebration, in his home, the doctor tried out his new wine. It was...it was basically colored water. No, this was not a reverse miracle of the wine being turned to water. It seems that most of the villagers had figured that their neighbors would be adding their best wine to the cask and so a single bottle of grape-colored water would not be detected. What the good doctor received was almost 100 bottles of

grape-colored water, each neighbor depending on the others to bring their best.

The first priority for stewards and servants is not what others are doing, or even are not doing. The first priority is my own trustworthiness before God. Given the sermon title, “It’s about the money,” let me hasten to say that our service and stewardship to God is more than money...but here’s the thing: I have never experienced a person who was sincerely faithful to God who was not also a faithful steward of their resources. True, faithful, sincere—honest faithfulness includes generosity.

It is not all about the money; there is so much more. But it is about the money. Money is sort of a test or a trial. Now I will admit to being uncomfortable about identifying all the ways that God tests us. Someone might argue that God does not test us at all; but Biblically speaking, that is a hard case to make. Scripture says God tested Abraham, one of the great faith figures in the Old Testament. The line in the Lord’s Prayer about “lead us not into temptation” could accurately be translated “don’t put us to the test.” Few of us want to be tested like Job is in the Bible: Job loses not only his wealth and resources; he loses his family and his health. My vision of God’s purpose is not so clear that every tragedy, every accident, every disease, every problem is a particular test from God. For example, this week you have may have heard one of the Amish elders speaking about the deaths of those young school girls. This elder said: “This was an act of God and God will see us through it.” I am not so ready to say it was an “act of God” but I am certain that God can see them through it. It is an opportunity or test to live by faith.

So whether we want to speak of God testing us, it is absolutely clear that God does give us opportunities to live faithfully. Think of it this way: God gives up the opportunity to mature in our faith. For example, we can move from crawling to walking. What parent does not want their healthy child to learn to walk? If we did not encourage our children to walk, children would get into a lot less trouble, we could keep them safe, we could guard them from the disasters that will come when they walk where they want to go. If we did not teach our children to walk, why, parents would not have to go through the terror of letting them drive a car! But it is absurd to suggest that we would not encourage our children to walk. Learning to walk will be a test or an opportunity to practice the ability to make decisions.

Money is a test of our ability to make decisions. Money is our opportunity to be trustworthy stewards and generous servants. Now the Biblical grading scale for this test is not uniform. For Jesus...for Paul...for that would-be-disciple we call the “rich young ruler,” it was everything. You may recall that very forthright young man who kept the Ten Commandments, who wanted to be faithful, and who came to Jesus to find out how to be pleasing to God. Jesus said simply: “Give all that you have away and come and follow me.” But the young man was very wealthy and he could not do it. He went away sadly. So, one grading scale is that it takes everything.

But there are other Biblical grading scales. Consider the follower of Jesus named Zacchaeus—that “wee little man” in the sycamore tree who wanted to see Jesus. You may recall that Jesus went to Zacchaeus’ house. Zachaeus responded to Jesus by giving away half of all his resources. The Zacchaeus grading scale is thus one-half. That is what he did after Jesus visited his house.

That is what happens when Jesus makes a home visitation. To think that some folks worry that members of the church might make a stewardship visit with a pledge card! Maybe they are really worried that Jesus might be coming along with them! The Zaccheus measure is one-half!

Then, of course, there is the Old Testament model: the tithe; one-tenth or 10 percent of one's annual revenue or income. The tithe has a long history of faithful practice among the people of God. It is tried and true...tested.

So, if you had 100 pennies, the Biblical grading scale might be: some gave a hundred (Jesus, Paul, and what was asked of the rich young ruler); some gave 50 pennies (Zacchaeus' measure); and the old reliable model is 10 pennies out of the 100 pennies.

What about this congregation? As some of you may recall, many of you completed a demographic survey last May. Out of 950 members, we received 420 surveys. We can be reasonably sure that this survey represents the most active half of our membership—they were here to take the survey over the three weeks that it was offered. The average contribution of our most active households (that is mainly who filled out the survey) is 3½ percent to the church. The survey says we give about 3½ pennies out of 100 pennies. I think it would be safe to assume that the giving percentage would not be higher among those less-active households.

Money is a test of our ability to make decisions. Money is an opportunity to show our trustworthiness as stewards of God. Now, our stewardship chair may buttonhole me after this sermon, but I am not really concerned about whether a person gives to this church's mission or not. I am much more concerned that followers of Jesus are practicing generosity. I have yet to meet the person who was tithing that was not finding the mission of the local church is an absolute priority in their giving. Yes, I am a firm believer in the United Way, the Red Cross, Interfaith Hospitality, Salvation Army, Amnesty International, Bread for the World, Church World Service, Dimes for Hunger, to name a few. Personally, the Pender household gives almost 8½ percent to this congregation's general budget. Are the other places that need and receive our generosity? Absolutely! But I do not know any other community or institution or group where generosity is taught and spreads than in a local church congregation. The local congregation is the seed bed that grows generosity.

Some have wondered about the budget that the Stewardship Campaign put forth. Here is something else that came out of that demographic. If the average household in this congregation would move up from 3½ pennies per household to 5 pennies per household, we would exceed the 1.4 million dollar goal of this campaign. We would have all the money we say we need to step up to the challenges that we have created for ourselves: staffing, property care, denominational support, benevolences.

As the apostle Paul addressed the discord in the church in Corinth, he asked the central question of stewardship: What do you have that you did not receive? We are simply trustees. Like the air in this jar, I do not own it. I can ruin it...I can trap it...I can do other things with it...but I do not own it. What do you have that you did not receive?

Recently, one of our deacons shared one of those “aha” experiences in which this stewardship message became crystal clear to her. It was an experience of parenthood. Once when her daughter was young, the mother had bought the daughter a candy bar as a snack. As the daughter was eating the candy bar, the mother said: “Let me have bite, please.” Not untypical for small children, the child said, “No.” “Oh, come on,” said the mother, “let me have a bite.” Now the child said forcefully, “NO.” The power struggle began. Give me a bite...NO...give me a bite...NO, NO, NO. Finally, in a bit of exasperation, the mother said, “You know you would not have that candy bar at all if it were not for me.” Says this deacon, suddenly the light when on about stewardship: What do you have that you did not receive?

Years ago Mother Teresa was fond of repeating this old saying: “God does not give us anything we can’t handle...I just sometimes wish God did not trust us so much.” Here is the thing: God trusts us so much. Can you handle it?