

***"The Church of the Future:
The Challenge of Stewardship"***

***Exodus 16:4-21
November 15, 2009***

***Ephesians 2:1-10
St. James UCC***

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As we look ahead at some of the important issues that the church is facing right now and will continue to face through the years to come, one of these issues is stewardship.

We know from our own experience that it takes both a lot of work and a lot of commitment to have the giving of our own congregation keep pace with rising costs, and new visions of what we want this congregation to be about and to be doing. For most people, the easiest thing is to keep giving what they've given before, in spite of the fact that each year a dollar buys less than it did the year before, in spite of the fact that in most years our income is higher than it was the year before, in spite of the fact that our visions for what we want the church to be about often grow and encompass new facts of ministry.

Another piece of reality is that we live in tough economic times. There's no doubt about that. Yes, there are clear signs that the economy is improving, but unemployment is still very high, salary increases have been and continue to be minimal at best for most people, and we live with a lot of uncertainty as to what the future holds.

As I look around Western New York at other UCC churches, I realize that virtually all of them are facing financial difficulties - churches of every denomination. I don't believe that for the church as a whole the issue will get any easier in the years to come - rising costs and the need for new ministries will keep challenging us to adequately fund our churches and their ministries.

Right now here at St. James we're doing very well on our budget. People are fulfilling or exceeding their commitments. Our expenditures are under budget, as we've been careful about what we spend, and we've made cuts wherever it's practical, but that too says little about next year or the years to follow.

Stewardship is often viewed in a very limited sense. For Christians stewardship is far more than a once a year campaign to fund the church budget, and the challenge of stewardship reaches well beyond the doors of our churches.

"Today, the entire planet Earth is at risk. We know that. Leaders from many different countries will be gathering in a few weeks in Stockholm to talk about global warming and

what we can together to prevent planet-wide catastrophe.

Here in Western New York we have had first hand experience with the incredible pollution that was discovered years ago at Love Canal, and the nuclear waste that they've been cleaning up in West Valley. We're familiar with beaches that close after heavy rain storms because of the high pollution levels from water coming into Lake Erie from various creeks, and these are but symptoms of global problems that are eating away at the health of this world in which we live.

We also live in a world where the very real and ever present risk of terrorist activities causes us to live with heightened security - security that you experience every time you go to the airport, or cross the border into Canada - which not that many years ago used to be very easy and routine.

Stewardship deals with how we care for the resources entrusted to our care - including this world in which we live. If we look back a century, life was harder in many ways. The conveniences which we enjoy today weren't even dreamed of. People worked hard and most of them barely scraped by, but the rivers and lakes were far cleaner than they are today. Smog and acid rain were unheard of. Global warming hadn't been invented. In the last 100 years the condition of our air and water and earth has worsened dramatically. With all of the chemicals surrounding us more and more people are developing sensitivities and allergies and diseases.

That's true today, but I think an even more important issue is what will the world be like 100 years from now? Obviously we don't and can't know the answer to that question. But do you think that these problems will be better or worse? How will our stewardship report card read? What is the legacy that we will leave for future generations?

The problem that has kept recurring and recurring is that we're always tempted to think of the resources of the world as our own, and when they're our own we can do anything with them that we want. We say, this is my house, my car, my country, my world... but, something inside us speaks up to remind us that all that we have really belongs to God - and is only entrusted to our care.

The temptation to think of things as belonging to us isn't new. Back when Moses was leading the Israelite people out of their slavery to the Egyptians they faced the same problem. There, out in the wilderness, God had promised to provide for the people - to give them all that they really needed. So that each morning manna would appear on the ground, and each evening a flock of quail would land.

They were instructed to gather only enough food for one day at a time - to only take what they really needed, except on the day before the Sabbath when they were to gather a two day supply. As you might expect, some people decided to gather more than they needed - to stash away something extra in case God didn't provide on schedule.

Did it get them anywhere? No, of course not. The extra food they stored away rotted, and then they got yelled at by Moses for being selfish and failing to trust in God. Do we try the same thing? Of course! We too like to think of this world as ours, to stash away as much as we can to care for ourselves, to only think about our own needs, and not to care about what's best for our nation or our world - or even about what God wants us to do. Does it get us anywhere? No! In fact, the problems just seem to get worse and worse. All that we've done is leave a mess that we hope our children and grandchildren will find some way to fix.

Our text from Ephesians says it very well when it describes our sinfulness with these words - "doing whatever suited the wishes of our own bodies and minds. In our natural condition, we, like everyone else, were destined to suffer God's anger."

Now the mistake that we have often made in the church is to read passages like that and conclude that our wishes and desires are sinful, that we need to automatically deny anything that our bodies or minds want.

Yet, that is not what this passage says. It describes them as sinful when our wishes and desires become the final authority, when I want something and so I automatically do it. The issue of stewardship is that our purpose is not just to please ourselves, but to please God, and so the question is not just do I want something, but what is it that God wants me to do?

God's call to us to be stewards reminds us that this world and its resources are not here just for our pleasure. Our goal shouldn't be to see how much we can get, to see how much we can accumulate for ourselves at the expense of others, for our call is to serve God.

As a person of faith, I know that God loves me, but that God doesn't love just me. God loves you and you and you, and each and every one of us. So that if I take care of myself in ways that hurt you, God's not going to be happy about that.

As we look to the church of the future, I don't think that these problems are going to go away, rather I suspect that they will loom bigger and bigger. They are going to demand that we change the way that we live, and the way that we think about our relationship to each other. These are not problems that you and I or even this country as a whole can solve by ourselves. We need to work together with other nations throughout the world.

Our stewardship will require that we set some new priorities for ourselves as individuals, for our nation, and for our world. We do not live in isolation from one another, rather the way that we live has serious consequences for the rest of the world, just as the way that they live has serious consequences for us. It is folly to think only of ourselves and what we want and need, for God has challenged us to think of ourselves as stewards, to ask how we can best use all of the resources entrusted to our care, and to take seriously the

problems of pollution, overpopulation, and scarcity of food and water, for this is God's world, not ours, and we are entrusted with the task of caring for it.

So far we haven't done a very good job as God's stewards. Whether the issue is funding the church or caring for the world, we think of the resources involved as ours, as belonging to us. The Challenge of Stewardship as we walk into God's future is a challenge to do better - to make stewardship a real priority in our own lives and on the agenda of our nation. Our task is to ask, how does God want us to care for this world and its resources - a world which after all belongs to God.

Amen.