

WANNA GO TO FLORIDA?

November 13, 2011

Well, this is the time of year that the annual southerly migration occurs. Some members of our congregation, in nomadic style, have already packed up their tents and moved. By a show of hands, how many of you plan to migrate to Florida, Arizona or some other warm destination this fall? Please keep your hands up. Please keep them up.

Now, those who plan to at least vacation in a warmer spot in the next six months raise your hands and keep them up.

And those who wish that they could join the others, raise your hands.

Now, tell me that we, as a congregation, can't discern a common purpose! It looks like almost all of us all have a desire to be warm and comfortable.

Even the youngest among us can discern that. One of the perks of being asked to speak to you is that I now have an audience who's expected to listen to me no matter what I choose to talk about. Have I told you that I have two grandchildren, Drew, age 3 and Camden, 7 months? Pictures and videos will be available in Pilgrim Hall after the service! I believe that they are the cutest and most precocious children, and I know that other grandparents feel the same way about their grandchildren. But of course, the difference between me and those other grandparents is that I'm right.

Last Saturday, while visiting Drew and Camden's home in the Twin Cities, the adults were talking about taking a trip in January to visit our son Andy, who left last Monday to start his winter job at a golf resort in Florida and who will likely not be home for Christmas. Our daughter Katy, Drew's mother, shared that their budget was probably too tight for them to be able to join Nancy and me. Drew, remembering an earlier Florida trip and with concern in his voice, asked, "Did we have money the last time we went to Florida?" As luck would have it, the next morning at their church, Drew's pastor had a few words for the members of the congregation heading to Florida, reminding them that they should try to remember the needs of their church and be sure to donate money. Upon hearing this, Drew spoke up loudly as children often do in church, enough for several rows to hear, "Mom, don't give them any more money, I wanna go to Florida!" How appropriate!

Children like Drew express out loud what many of us think to ourselves when asked to consider our relationship to the stewardship of the church. Today, I'm here to ask you to examine the way you approach that conversation with yourself and to point out what Christ and his followers taught us about giving. In early October, Bruce Shafer and I traveled and Pastor Chuck made somewhat of a pilgrimage to St. Louis (on the night of our arrival, the Cards beat the Phillies 5-3 to force Game 5. I think Chuck really felt a need to be among like minded fans).

But, we were actually in St. Louis to attend a UCC-sponsored faith and fundraising workshop. There we learned that there are two primary ways that church members approach giving. The first is out of a sense of obligation. The vast majority use this approach, thinking of their giving

as another bill to pay. Modern society emphasizes consumerism and many church members approach giving this way, as a purchased service. Have you ever heard of someone “shopping for a church?” Have you ever “shopped for a church?” Are you there because your first priority is to make sure that the church you attend matches your needs and desires? Do your feelings about giving have more to do with what you can get out of the church than what you can put into it? I have to admit that over the years my thinking was influenced by these motives.

The second way to approach giving to the church is out of a sense of generosity. A person using this approach really believes that all they have is a gift from God; God has generously given them their time on earth, their talents, their possessions, their family, their friends, their church, in a word . . . everything! In this approach God doesn't really have time for consuming. God is all about giving. There is no one more generous than God. A person acting out of generosity does so with a sense of joy and thankfulness for everything they have and with a true commitment for the mission of the church in the community and the world.

In the reading from 2nd Corinthians that Shona shared, Paul praised the financial sacrifice that the church in Macedonia made to assist the devastated people in Jerusalem despite extreme conditions of poverty that prevailed in Macedonia. To quote the scripture: ***They have been severely tested by the troubles they went through; but their joy was so great that they were extremely generous in their giving, even though they are very poor.*** The faithful Macedonians understood God's purpose for them and appreciated the gifts they were given and responded to the need with unbridled joy.

In the letter, Paul was addressing the church in Corinth. Corinth was a wealthy Greek city, a vital center of commerce with two busy sea ports. Because they had greater means, he encouraged them, saying: ***Since you have plenty at this time, it is only fair that you should help those who are in need. Then, when you are in need and they have plenty, they will help you.***

Paul recognized that the Macedonians understood the joy of discipleship and their willingness, despite their own hardship, to share in the cost. He was committed to bringing that joy and commitment to the Corinthians. Do you know the joy? Do you feel that commitment?

It's not uncommon for church members to feel very uncomfortable hearing about finances and stewardship. As a result a common thing to do in churches is to organize a focused campaign of fundraising accompanied with maybe one sermon on the subject. At Union, we have done this for many years under the title of the Every Member Canvass. I mean no disrespect to those who led and responded faithfully to that process. Nevertheless, I am here to tell you that by using that approach we were really not following the example of Christ.

Imagine this: If you were present to hear Jesus speaking to his disciples, you would have experienced messages on money and giving almost half of the time. Amazing isn't it? We are uncomfortable hearing about giving and Jesus spent a lot of time talking about it so that we could learn to be joyous, giving disciples. To be God's agents in the world, we need to heed and then act on Jesus' words.

The Gospel reading today is from Luke, chapter 12, verses 13 to 34. I am reading today from the Good News Bible. It's the Parable of the Rich Fool.

A man in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide with me the property our father left us." Jesus answered him, "Friend, who gave me the right to judge or to divide the property between you two?" And he went on to say to them all, "Watch out and guard yourselves from every kind of greed; because your true life is not made up of the things you own, no matter how rich you may be." Then Jesus told them this parable: "There was once a rich man who had land which bore good crops. He began to think to himself, 'I don't have a place to keep all my crops. What can I do?' 'This is what I will do,' he told himself. 'I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, where I will store the grain and all my other goods.' Then I will say to myself, 'Lucky man! You have all the good things you need for many years. Take life easy, eat, drink, and enjoy yourself.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night you will have to give up your life; then who will get all these things you have kept for yourself?' And Jesus concluded, 'This is how it is with those who pile up riches for themselves but are not rich in God's sight.'

And then Jesus said to the disciples, 'And so I tell you not to worry about the food you need to stay alive or about the clothes you need for your body. Life is much more important than food, and the body much more important than clothes. Look at the crows: they don't plant seeds or gather a harvest; they don't have storage rooms or barns; God feeds them! You are worth so much more than birds! Can any of you live a bit longer by worrying about it? If you can't manage even such a small thing, why worry about the other things? Look how the wild flowers grow: they don't work or make clothes for themselves. But I tell you that not even King Solomon with all his wealth had clothes as beautiful as one of these flowers. It is God who clothes the wild grass—grass that is here today and gone tomorrow, burned up in the oven. Won't he be all the more sure to clothe you? What little faith you have!'

So don't be all upset, always concerned about what you will eat and drink. (For the pagans of this world are always concerned about all these things.) Your Father knows that you need these things. Instead, be concerned with God's Kingdom, and he will provide you with these things.

Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the Kingdom. Sell all your belongings and give the money to the poor. Provide for yourselves purses that don't wear out, and save your riches in heaven, where they will never decrease, because no thief can get to them, and no moth can destroy them. For your heart will always be where your riches are.

Jesus expects us to experience the joy that comes from acknowledging our gifts and being generous in their use. Are you ready to experience that joy?

Another aspect of experiencing the joy is to, as Jesus said, “be concerned with God’s Kingdom.” This is a call to discipleship. He is saying that we need to discern God’s purpose for our time on this earth and to pursue it joyfully. I pray that our purpose discernment activities will help us come to clear consensus on God’s purpose for Union Church in this community and beyond. Having a generous heart moved by the presence of the Holy Spirit is this call. Are you ready to answer that call?

Bruce, Chuck and I came back from St. Louis with a commitment to promote generosity as the underlying motive for our stewardship program, which we are calling “The Cost and Joy of Discipleship.” Todd Kane and John Shier have agreed to join our Generosity Team. Over the next several weeks we will provide information about this approach to stewardship. You can expect that this approach will not be a one-shot deal; stewardship is really required all the time. (By the way, Chuck, the bulletin identifies today as Generosity Sunday. That’s old thinking. It should say “Generosity Lifetime.” I didn’t mean that as criticism.)

You can also expect a full commitment to transparency in financial matters. Information provided will be stated and shown with clarity and in ways that closely tie expenditures to the church’s purpose. And finally, we will do our best to lead you in prayerful consideration of your own generosity and commitment to our shared purpose.

On December 11th, you will be asked to make a pledge to support our combined work towards fulfilling that purpose.

Union Church has a long history of being a faithful presence in the life of this community. Armed with newly focused members, having a renewed sense of generosity and hearts filled by the Holy Spirit, our greatest accomplishments lie ahead of us.

Those of you headed to warmer climes, it’s OK to “Wanna Go To Florida.” Just remember that your joyous and generous spirit is still needed here! Amen.

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