

Zion's UCC of Taborton  
Stewardship Sunday  
February 11, 2018  
Rev. Konrad Raup

Holy Giving  
Acts 5: 1-11; Luke 21: 1-4

Today we celebrate the least appreciated time in the church calendar— stewardship Sunday! Ok, that was the point where you were supposed to leap to your feet and clap for joy. Normally, stewardship Sunday happens in the autumn, but your finance committee chose to postpone it this year because the congregation was otherwise engaged in October. I think that was a very wise move, don't you?

We often talk about the three "t's" of discipleship— time, talent, and treasure. All three are important. The donation of time and talent often show up in sermons. Today treasure gets a turn.

How did you like that story from the book of Acts? The very early Christians were donating all of their possessions to the church. Yes, they were creating a kind of primitive communist society. Karl Marx didn't pull his theories out of thin air, you know. They were doing it because they thought that Jesus would return very soon to initiate the reign of God so they really didn't need all their stuff. Guess that shows that even the apostles didn't have it all right.

But Ananias and Sapphira were a little more cautious. They wanted some backup. So they diversified. They gave most of their wealth to the apostles, but they put some aside just in case this new faith went bust.

Apparently, word got back to Peter of this bit of financial planning and he confronted Ananias and Sapphira separately. Caught in their lie, they both dropped dead.

Now let me assure you that this story never happened as it is portrayed. God does not strike you down for not handing over all your wealth to the church. I don't even want to think about all the stress that would cause. Can you imagine a scenario where you give Zion's all your money and then we decide, by Congregational vote, whether or not you can get that new refrigerator or truck, or maybe take that vacation. Can you imagine the exciting Congregational meetings we could have. You can write Zion's a check during coffee hour if you're still interested.

In the story, Ananias and Sapphira weren't struck down for greed, Peter says that it is their money and they are free to give it away or keep it. They are really struck down for lying about what they had done. They had boasted about giving all, When they hadn't.

Once again, let me assure you that God doesn't strike people down because they lie. If that were the case, we'd be knee deep in bodies, Even up here on the mountain.

I suspect that this is a story that was inserted into the text at a later time by someone who was dealing with a congregation that was dishonest in their attitude toward stewardship. Eliminating those who oppose you (and even better, having God don't) is a common human fantasy, even among the clergy.

But, true or not, the story does have a non-fatal moral point to make. What each of us gives to our church is a decision that can only be made between you and God. I would never stand up here and tell you what to give. Do what you think is right. If this faith Community is important to you, then show it. If it's not, then give your money to other causes that are important to you. But you have to be honest about that decision.

That's the point of our Gospel reading today. I have done some research and I have found that there are 94 billionaires in New York State. We are second only to California in that number. That would seem to prove false the argument that our tax structure is driving rich people away, wouldn't it? I have also discovered that, of those 94, none of them attend Zion's UCC. Which means, of course that we cannot depend on them to underwrite the costs of running this church. I think that's a good thing. It makes each of us responsible for building the reign of God on the Rensselaer plateau, if we really want that to happen. Though I Did see an article on the BBC news website this week that Monaco is running out of room for their millionaires. Maybe we could take in some of their refugees.

Remember what Jesus said about the widow who gave the small coin? Because she gave from her want, her gift was more precious than the others. I hear so much talk about how wonderful the ultra rich are because they give away millions of dollars. But, they could give away 100 times what they do and they would still be obscenely rich. So are their gifts really so heroic? I am much more impressed with the person who has little, but shares what they have with those around them. I believe there is more generosity in a homeless encampment than in the Fort Orange Club down in Albany. Fifty cents tossed into a Salvation Army kettle seems much more Holy to me than \$10 million from Bill Gates.

I am told that if you look at the consumer price index and the cost of Living and do some magical math, you find that things cost about 2% more this year than last. So to keep even, we have to raise our income by 2%. That's not much. It means that if you've been giving \$10 a week, you might raise it to \$10.20. A hundred a week goes to \$102.00. A thousand a week to \$1,020.00. As I think about it, if you're giving a thousand a week, we need to have lunch. You can buy.

That 2% is just a guide. The UCC offers that we should, if we can, tithe. That means giving away 10% of your income to all charities. Some to the church and some to other places. Again, Only you and God know whether what you are giving is what is right in your particular situation. Sometimes, when finances get strained, it's perfectly ok to cut back on what you give. Your pastors do not look at who gives what and we will treat each of you as if you were one of those 94 billionaires. Actually, we will treat you better than we would treat them.

If you've already sent in your pledge, wonderful! Should you now feel moved to give more, that's wonderful too! I have been assured that the counters will not complain when more than expected comes in. Our treasurer, Hal Hoffman, will not call you up and yell at you if your giving exceeds your pledge.

Time, talent and treasure are all needed. Treasure is mundane, but still necessary. You are a generous congregation. You are especially good about providing for specific goals like the parish hall. I am not asking that each of you do more, only that you think and pray about your own situation in a honest and faithful way.