

ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE

27TH Sunday after Pentecost – November 20, 2016

Stewardship Commitment Sunday

Texts: Psalm 46 and Colossians 1:9-20

I have always thought of giving as being based on two fundamental principles – and, only two:

- Gratitude to God for the ways in which I have been blessed, and
- My recognizing need in others/institutions/communities.

I look at these principles on a day like today and I ask myself whether it is even necessary to speak to the first? Need I say anything at all to you about the ways in which this congregation has been blessed this past year? For the past several weeks we have invited members and friends to speak to us of the importance of First Congregational Church in their lives. We have heard from youth, young adults, and seniors among us as they have testified to the ministry and mission of this congregation and how these have impacted their lives.

Last week FCC witnessed the fruits of the labor of the Pastoral Search Committee as Lorie introduced the next Pastor and Teacher of this wonderful congregation. Nancy Taylor was led to us in the search process. She was drawn to this congregation as she read its profile, interviewed with the search committee, came to Oshkosh for a second interview, and then came for the Call Weekend. Nancy told me she was

particularly drawn to the spirit of this congregation and its commitment to be of service to the community and the wider church. As result of a successful vote, Nancy and Chey will be coming to live in Oshkosh, and Nancy will be your pastor beginning on January 23, 2017!

When blessings like these come our way, are we not moved to pledge our support for this congregation in 2017? You see, in my mind, it would be absolutely enigmatic were this congregation not moved this year to be utterly grateful to God for the ways things have been going for us. I know that Fanny and I will be making a modest pledge toward your budget in 2017 even though we shall not be taking part in the life and mission of your church. Why? Do you recall the first principle? We are so grateful for how well things have gone here during my service to you as interim that we want to express our gratitude by giving in 2017.

As I look at this congregation and its importance to the Oshkosh community historically, I share the concerns the Ministry Council has regarding the future of First Congregational Church. There are at least three areas of deferred maintenance regarding our present building that will have to be addressed in 2017: Tiffany stained glass windows, the Cassavantes organ, and some continuing concerns around the heating system. More than this, I see and hear the expressions of need to strengthen the witness and mission of this congregation in the future.

Fanny and I plan to make a pledge to the Capital Campaign of FCC if you all vote to move forward with that project. Why? Because we see the need and we appreciate the spirit of this congregation as we have come to know it during my service to you as Interim Pastor.

So, there you have it: my philosophy on giving. I give because I am grateful to God for all the many blessings I have received; and I am moved to give where I sense the need is greatest at the time. Please note that neither of these principles represents a certain amount of money. No one is ever asked to give what he or she cannot give – and, that certainly has applied to Fanny and me in our lifetime. We have given as we were able, always starting with the biblical tithe as the basis of our gifts to church and charity. Each of us is asked to consider how it is that God has blessed us and to respond with thanksgiving. Each of us is met with need in all its configurations throughout our lives and is expected to respond as we are moved to do so.

Looking back on our lives, as Fanny and I are wont to do, it seems as we grow older, another message comes through to us regarding the way in which we have stewarded our lives and the blessings we have received. In fact, while driving back from Saint Louis earlier this week, we were noticing how often we have been asked to respond to need in the world and how we've done so. As we spoke, we began to see a

pattern to what at first looks like random responses to varied requests. That pattern seemed to be suggesting that we take note of how often our efforts to be good stewards resulted in what, at first glance seemed impossible odds against success, and might be termed unpredictable possibility!

In our first setting in ministry, the little mission church of the UCC in Hershey, PA, my third year out of seminary, we witnessed a successful capital campaign in which we raised twice as much as was needed to build our building on West Chocolate Ave! Later, when I was only two months into serving as Conference Minister of the Northern Plains Conference, UCC it was discovered that this small membership conference was bankrupt. Eleven years later, when I retired from that post, the conference had nearly one million dollars in reserve – all of which started with an emergency campaign established twelve years before to rebuild our modest reserve to \$50,000! In both cases, at the beginning of my service as a minister and at the end, small groups of people learned anew how utterly true it is that *with God all things are possible*.

We have come through an utterly unpredictable Presidential election process in our country. In this past year much was revealed about us to ourselves and to the world that we might have preferred to

go unknown. One of the lessons we are only beginning to grasp is that we can either have democracy in our country, or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few. We can't have both.

We are realizing now, for example, that when the economic gaps between us get too big, it is not a good thing for society. Many of our economic crises in our history have been preceded by great divides between the top and the bottom of society. We are also realizing that our neighbors matter, and that our well-being is connected to theirs. If we listen carefully, we might learn why all of our religious traditions spend so much time talking about the poor and vulnerable – and, why their well-being is seen to be one of the best tests of any society's integrity. Because when they are forgotten, the social bonds that hold the rest of us will soon be in jeopardy, too.

As we gather this week to celebrate Thanksgiving with family and friends, how will we reflect on the importance of being open to sharing with others as an expression of our gratitude to God for all our blessings? Haven't most of us in this sanctuary this morning lived long enough to realize that God's economy is not ours; God's ways are not our ways; and God's reality is not our reality. The story of the boy who had loaves and fish to share with a crowd who came to hear Jesus is not the only time God has taken that which we have dared to offer and done

the impossible with it! God's economy teaches us that when we share, things tend to multiply. In God's economy we learn that what we think we know about the world is not how the world has to be.

All that is needed for God to act in our midst is for us to respond out of thanksgiving for those blessings we have received – and, for our hearts to be moved, no matter how large or big, to respond to a need presented to us in our daily walks in life. This is what we are being asked to do today as we place our commitments to next year's budget in the commitment boxes and pray God's blessing upon our intent to give toward the mission and ministry of this congregation. May God's Spirit bless and guide us as we do so.

Amen.