

Saint Mark Presbyterian Church

Stewardship Devotional Guide
Fall 2019

Dear Saint Mark Community,

As members of Saint Mark, you are part of a community that seeks to combine spirit with service. Through the practices of study, prayer, worship, service and stewardship, you strengthen our capacity as a church to fulfill God's call to give ourselves to serving others with our time, abilities and money.

We hope that the enclosed Devotional Guide will provide you with encouragement, illumination, and resolve to continue to further the work God calls all of us to do in our community.

Fellow members Jocelyn Callister, Scott Clark and Rachel Kaufmann contributed to the Guide. Please thank them when you see them for their contributions.

On the back side there is a coloring page for you or your family. As you color, consider what you are thankful to God for in your life, and how you might give back to God.

We look forward to working and sharing with you to accomplish more of our mission in 2020.

Very truly yours,

Pastor Shelby Etheridge Harasty
Pastor Roy Howard
Elder Dick Pavlin

Scripture

Luke 6:37-38 - 37 (NRSV)

Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; 38 give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.

Reflection

These words from Jesus come from a message that he gave to a large, diverse crowd who had gathered to “hear him and be healed of their diseases” (Luke 6:18). In his commentary on Luke, theologian Joel B. Green characterizes the passage that includes this text as defining “the new conditions of existence in Jesus’ community,” and as unveiling “the general perspectives and practices that will characterize those who participate in this community.” This brings to mind Jesus’ prayers for his followers that we be in the world but not of the world (John 17); as disciples of Christ, we are called to be salt and light in the world, to stand out in a way that points others to Jesus. How are we to do so? As Green concludes in his commentary, Jesus repeatedly directs us in this sermon to “Love your enemies, Do good, and Give (true) gifts.”

I find this to be personally challenging. If I am honest with myself, I often love myself first, act out of my own interests, and give with a mindset of scarcity, rather than one of appreciating the abundance in which I live. Remarkably, although Jesus describes in this sermon a series of impacts on our lives contingent on our own behavior, God has already freely granted us overflowing gifts:

The wonders of creation and our part in it,
Holy Scripture revealing the Lord’s character and will,
the Sacraments,
Jesus’ redeeming death and resurrection, and
the comfort and leading of the Holy Spirit.

In calling us to stand out from the world, God has certainly led by example in ways that bless us even before we act. When I take time to stop and pay attention to the full extent of God’s grace, how can I not want to respond with all I am and all I have?

Prayer

Lord, you have shown us what it means to be extravagant in how we love, act, and give, and you call us to do the same. We pray that you will give us a deep appreciation for the abundant blessings you bring daily to our lives, and that you will incline our hearts in such a way that we act with gratitude and generosity.

—Scott Clark

Scripture

Acts 20: 32-38 (ESV)

And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'

Reflection

Paul shares these thoughts with new believers along a whistle-stop tour of the Mediterranean - he has one shot with each community to jam-pack all the theological information they need. By highlighting his actions that prove his teachings, he becomes more than a preacher, he is an example too.

My parents were an example of such a way of life to me – they brought me up on the principal of "preach the gospel always - when necessary use words." While most of what we have from Paul today are his words – and so many of them at that – he also tells us his life's actions showed his obedience and faith.

In researching this passage, I found out that mantra from my parents, which is most commonly attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, actually *wasn't* said or written by him. In the same way, my Study Bible points out, the words Paul quotes as belonging to Jesus, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' also never appear in the gospels as words spoken by Jesus.

Does this mean these ideas are meaningless? Or maybe it means these ideas are so clearly 'holy' that we associate them with our Spiritual Leaders? In my own life, I have found that letting these principles guide me has indeed been a rewarding way to live and it inspires me to continue to give of my Time, Talents and Finances – to continue to experience God's blessing and be his disciple.

Prayer

Dear God, during this season of prayerfully considering how we may best do your work through Saint Mark, through our Time, Talents and Finances, thank you for your promise to bless those who bless. Make us GIVERS so that we may better RECEIVE your gifts for us.

—Jocelyn Callister

Scripture

Matthew 26:6-13 (NRSV)

⁶ Now while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper,⁷ a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table. ⁸ But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, “Why this waste? ⁹ For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor.” ¹⁰ But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, “Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me. ¹¹ For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. ¹² By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial. ¹³ Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

Reflection

We are never told precisely how much this ointment costs, but from the disciples’ horrified reaction we can be sure it was a lot. We also don’t know anything about the woman herself – whether she was rich, poor, or somewhere in between. But whatever her circumstances, I’m sure she also could have used the ointment in any number of ways. The passage tells us she chose without hesitation to use it for good service.

The varying reactions to her bold act of faith is what catches my attention each time I read this story. The disciples heap scorn on the woman for what they believe is a costly misuse of a commodity with a high resale value. They likely worried about how wasteful her decision was. The disciples could not yet see there were good reasons to use the ointment. By contrast, the woman in our story does not seem worried about what the disciples think of her decision to use the contents of the entire jar on Jesus’s head. Rather, she acted assuredly, likely guided by faith, that her gift was being used wisely.

The woman’s sure actions of giving – without worry, without fear, without hesitation – can serve as a good illustration of how we might approach our own decisions about what and how much to pledge during this stewardship season.

When I start thinking and yes, sometimes worrying, about what to pledge to Saint Mark, my thoughts routinely turn to my father. Aspects of this passage also remind me of my dad’s habits. On the surface, my father and the unnamed woman are quite different. It’s understating things to say my father was a frugal person: he recycled things before recycling became ‘a thing’. During a rebuilding project on our house, my brother the contractor watched in horror as my father pulled used nails from the old boards, hammered them straight again, and reused them. But my frugal father was like the unnamed woman in this respect: he acted boldly and without hesitation on Sundays when he wrote his check for our tithe and placed it in our church’s little pre-printed envelope.

My father didn’t complain about what else he could have done with our tithe, or worry that he wouldn’t have enough money to pay his bills. Instead, like the woman in the story, he put his commitment to God first, and believed that his gift would be used to glorify God wherever it was needed. Dad’s actions from years ago still serve as powerful lesson to me today. And

the memory of my father's actions, combined with the story of the unnamed woman's bold gift, will serve as part of the inspiration for my gift to Saint Mark this year.

Prayer

God of all things, open our hearts that we may give joyfully because of your assurance to us that you will supply all of our needs. In your spirit we pray. Amen.

—Rachel Kaufmann

Scripture

Luke 18: 9-14 (NRSV)

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Reflection

In this parable, though the Pharisee comes off as self-righteous, fasting twice a week and giving a tenth of your income is not a small thing. It may help to note that, in fact, everything the Pharisee says is true. He *has* set himself apart from others by his faithful adherence to the law. He takes his spiritual disciplines (fasting and tithing) seriously, and does them with care.

It made me wonder, how carefully do I consider my spiritual disciplines, how seriously do I take them? If I took them as seriously as the Pharisee, what might change?

Our Presbyterian Church Book of Order says that "Giving has always been a mark of Christian commitment and discipleship. The ways in which a believer uses God's gifts of material goods, personal abilities, and time should reflect a faithful response to God's self-giving in Jesus Christ and Christ's call to minister to and share with others in the world."

Giving is not a thing to check off the to-do list on the path to glory, but something that comes from from our faith and trust in God.

That's always the hardest part for me- faith and trust in God. I am the first to admit that I like to be in control. I like to be in on the decision making, every step of the way. But when we give to the church, we are letting go and allowing the Holy Spirit to take the lead. I have seen money that I have given do so much more than it would sitting in my bank account. I have seen my money build a kitchen at Crossway Community, a handicap ramp at Interfaith Works, sustain a building that creates community for our congregation and thousands of people who will never step into our sanctuary. I have seen my money send kids to Haiti, West Virginia and Philadelphia, and help kids grow in their faith right here in Rockville.

Prayer

God whose loving mercy stretches from the Pharisee to the tax collector and across all of us, help us to do what we can, give what we can and offer what we can. Not out of guilt, or to say we've done it, but because we trust in and offer thanks and praise to you. May the gifts of our lives be given in worship of you, may we glorify you in all that we are and in all that we do. Amen.

—Rev. Shelby Etheridge Harasty