

Growing in Giving

Saint Mark PC

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In a country store, there is a display of artwork filled with short sayings done in counted cross stitch. You have probably seen them - sayings like "Back door friends are best". Or "The cat and its housekeeping staff live here." But one saying in counted cross stitch in the country store really gives us something to think about on Stewardship kickoff Sunday, and is surely just as true as those other ones.

"Anyone can count the number of seeds in an apple - but only God can count the number of apples in a seed"

In the fall season, in more normal times, we would go off to an apple orchard - maybe Lariland's or Baugher's up in Westminster to go out and pick our own apples to last all winter. The orchards are literally teeming with apples, beyond count or imagining. The ground is half covered with them - the trees are bulging with fruit in a good year.

There is a spiritual principle in apples. Think of God's ability to take a little seed of faith and multiply it into something far beyond what we could imagine.

Growing up in Pittsburgh, we heard stories of people like Andrew Carnegie who liked to plant seeds. He came to Pittsburgh from Scotland, began as a laborer in a textile mill, but then grew to be a wealthy man beyond imagining. You may or may not approve of his business policies or employment practices, but there is no doubt

in the end he amassed a great deal of what he called surplus wealth. He chose to begin to distribute this surplus wealth during his lifetime.

So he donated around \$350 million during his lifetime - equal to about \$5 Billion - and we know his specialty was libraries.. 2,500 new libraries were founded where only 900 existed before.

This was a kind of seed planting. And of course, Andrew was a Presbyterian.

Only God could count the fruit that has resulted from all those books in all those libraries read by generations of people.

How do you put a price on a child having access to the great works of literature or scientific information or educational material at their fingertips?

More than we can imagine.

I would say if you look through the Biblical witness, part of God's plan has been to plant seeds. God has always been a seed planter, and wants us to be sowers of seeds as well in a way that they will produce beyond our wildest imagination.

In Matthew 13, Jesus talks about seeds. In particular, we heard the Mustard Seed parable, which is about God taking a small bit of faith and multiplying it. But just before that parable is the explanation of the parable of the Sower - again it goes in to the idea of seeds, and of exponential growth from hearers who are good soil - who are receptive to the leading of Jesus, who are in effect 'good stewards' of the faith that has

been granted to them, and their yield, you might say is unbelievably good. Thirty, Sixty, a Hundred fold.

We might wonder if what we do as disciples matters, or if our church makes a difference in our community. Does our giving have any impact? These seed stories remind us that God takes even a little seed of faith and grows it into something fantastic and amazing, whose yield is beyond comprehension.

I have been getting to talk to some members and I see that some of us were here all the way back when the seed was planted for this congregation over 60 years ago. There is a lot of history since that first group chartered here. They were - we were in effect seeds planted in expectation of a great harvest in the years and decades to come.

But my question is, could any of those original members count the number of apples produced by the seed they planted here? Could we even imagine the number of lives touched by that seed of a church planted here so long ago?

I think we also have taken pride in being seed planters in our mission and ministry over those years since the founding. How about for example, the coffee house in the 1970s, Saint Mark house, supporting many, many community organizations, including Action in Montgomery county. How about global mission - with Haiti and Cameroon and others, mission trips overseas. Those are apples that this church has helped to produce.

How about our years of involvement in standing up for social justice in our community, and leading the way in working together with other faith groups, or participating in missions to feed the hungry? I have

heard from more than one long term member the pride evident in the work of Saint Mark in the historic 1960s Civil Rights movement which changed our nation. Several others tell me that the overall approach of this church to better the community feels authentic. How can we count that yield?

But now we are in an Interim period, a transitional time and we are the ones now considering what seeds we will plant for this congregation. We are starting to ask what kind of Pastor will we seek, and how will our ministry and mission change, or should it change? We are going to be gathering information and ideas. We are asking -truly where is God leading us into this future, and how can we participate with what God is already doing around us?

Our community is constantly changing, so what needs are out there that we can meet, and do we need to do anything differently to achieve that? One thing we know, we can't see the future, but we also know that God calls us to sow seeds nonetheless. That means that God calls us to be generous givers, good stewards of what God has given us.

Our church seeks to support people of all different ages and backgrounds - young families with kids and youth, a worship time that has something for all ages, a great choir and music director who offer a ministry of music to all ages, and, when we can get there again, a lovely church campus and grounds.

Maybe you think it's only those big churches who can make a big splash. Well, do you know the latest trend being observed by church consultants? I read a book by Brandon O'Brien who says maybe - just maybe - a medium size is the ideal church size, because it allows for

intergenerational ministry to take place, as opposed to some of the big mega churches. A church who is able to adapt, to be authentic, to be strategic. How about that?

We always have provided space to welcome the local community 7 days a week here in the church building and facilities - as a way to extend our hospitality to those around us, in the name of Jesus Christ. I tell people often that I found Saint Mark because I came to IMT concerts here often. I always felt it was a kind of community outreach to welcome others into your building.

Extending hospitality to our local community is a ministry all to itself. We can't do it right now, but we will once again in the future.

I bring all this up because we look to the coming church year, to what God has in store for us. None of us can predict right now what 2021 is going to look like, and the Session is doing a good job, and will continue along with the Task Force to think through various scenarios. It's already challenging enough in some respects, when a long-time pastor decides to move on, and the feeling of change that comes along with that.

But here's the thing - as people of faith, we are not fearful of the future. God never deals in negatives, in other words when it comes to the church, God doesn't focus on what we don't have, but God just asks us to have faith, and keep planting seeds, continuing to grow and nurture disciples, and serve our community as always.

I believe God always asks us to look at this ministry not in terms of scarcity, but of abundance! Not in terms of what we lack, but in terms of what God will provide for us.

That's why we continue to grow in giving.

We know the seed we plant in this season will produce countless beautiful apples in the days and months to come. Remember, God's strategy for changing the world is to plant seeds!

We may think what we have to offer is small. We may even think our church is, in the grand scheme of things, small. We may think our gifts or our ministry is insignificant. That is why I always recall the parable of the mustard seed. God can take that little seed of faith and allow it to grow more than we ever imagined, something that produces nourishment for the spirits of a hungry world.

So God asks us to grow in our giving - giving of ourselves, our time to ministry and our abilities, and even our treasures. It is our joy to be able to give of ourselves to the kingdom of God.

Our Stewardship Ministry has been very hard at work to plant seeds among us. We look forward to their witness and messages over the next many weeks. We keep our hearts open to what God is saying to us through their work.

Many years ago, Helen Keller came up with an interesting quote. After she had overcome so much in her life, she said "I don't want to spend my life. I

want to invest it in something that lasts. I want to invest in eternity."

Each of us by growing in giving of ourselves makes an investment in what God is doing in our community, and we participate in Gods ministry through Jesus Christ.

Because anybody can count the number of seeds in an apple, but only God can count the number of apples in a seed.