

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
November 6, 2011(Actually Nov. 13, 2011)
Luke 6:37-38

"Numbers...what story do they tell us?"

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight,
O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.

Although I lift up and cheer on our annual Fall Stewardship Campaign, I must admit that I do not think Church Stewardship can be contained in a Fall Campaign. We are not National Public Radio that launches a "fall fund drive" and talks about giving to NPR on certain days of the year and then they are done with it.

We are God's people and our Stewardship Campaign involves so much more than meeting a budget. Stewardship is our response to being God's people, bearing the imprint of God, gathering together in community, recognizing the importance of our faith, and supporting a modest but thriving institution that nurtures our faith. My colleague the Rev. Caroline Meyers says, "Stewardship is everything we do after we have said "YES" to God."

Stewardship is about knowing we are blessed and sharing that blessing, it is about gracefully responding to God's unconditional love and unlimited grace. Stewardship is not defined by a season, confined by dates, or delineated by numbers on an EXCEL spreadsheet. It is who we are, it is our response to being in a faith community, it is an expression of our generosity, which, according to the apostle Paul, is one of the fruits of the Spirit.

Having said all of that I recognize that we are also "numbers people." And that we have this Fall campaign to talk about our giving, the church budget, and a target goal we have set. AND this year we have been counting...counting our blessings, counting our Saints, counting our children in Children's Church, counting our pennies. We have been counting. We like numbers, and we have been talking a lot about numbers.

Today I am going to share some numbers that have relevance to this Church and some numbers that appear in the Bible. We'll see if they paint a picture and tell a story. So now some numbers of importance in Scripture and some ways that the number you choose to pledge to this Church makes a difference...

66: There are 66 Books in the Bible...39 in the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament. One of those books in the Bible is the Book of Numbers.

Why? Because the early Jews wanted to be counted. They wanted to take stock. They wanted to know how many they numbered. Listen to this passage from the Book of Numbers: "The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying: Take a census of the whole congregation of Israelites, in their clans, by ancestral houses, according to the number of names..." The Israelites wanted to be named and numbered. They wanted to be counted. And we want to be counted too. We want to know that we matter, that we count. Here in this Church we make it clear that if you wander through this door, we will embrace you, we count you as a friend.

At this Church we mean it when we say, "Whoever you are, wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." And you can count on that.

3,427: That dollars. That is what the Church Fair, run by our Ladies Aid, raised this year at the October Fair. And what will the Ladies Aid do with all the money they counted and deposited in the bank? They will give it away, like they do every year...to the Relay for Life, VNA Hospice, Berkshire Children and Families, Pioneer Valley Habitat for Humanity, relief for Haiti, and support for this Church...the Taize songbooks in your pews, the gift Bibles in that basket. The Ladies Aid raises money and they give that money away on behalf of our Church.

48: That's the number of children registered in our Children's Church program: 48 kids. Each week the welcome circle, a new Godly Play lesson, songs, and later a lunch. 48 children who get to experience our open, loving, Montessori-based program with trained teachers and supportive parents. This is a remarkable thing.

2: That's the number of Mitten Trees we put up during Advent. We used to put up 1 Mitten Tree to collect hats, gloves, scarves and mittens for children....but you overwhelmed the 1 Mitten Tree and so we put up a second. And even now we have to lay our gifts below the trees because the trees are laden with your warm and wooly offerings. After Advent we give all the wonderful stuff from our 2 Mitten Trees to local school children. Two is also the number of furnaces in this building, one for the Sanctuary, one for the Dining Room and upstairs. We fill those furnaces with fuel paid for by our pledges.

12: That's the number of disciples Jesus called and loved, those who gave up everything to follow him. And yet among Jesus' beloved 12 there was 1 who would betray him, 1 who would deny him, and all would desert him at the end.

But Jesus loved all 12. And Jesus loves us, his contemporary disciples, all of us saints and sinners and a little of both.

126,543: That's our Stewardship goal for this year...it's a modest goal, a do-able goal, and I think we will meet it. We are a not-huge church with a pretty-huge program!

15: That's the exact size of this congregation when I arrived in 2005. And then a few weeks into my ministry one couple left because I was too progressive. So we were 13 together with God-called and commissioned to grow this church.

800: That's the number of pipes in our organ. Some of the pipes play, some are just decorative. We have a beautiful, historic, hand-painted organ that takes approximately \$1,500 per year to tune and maintain.

3: That stands for Mind, Body, and Spirit-in this Church we try to nurture all three. We bring a holistic approach, we love and honor ALL of who you are and we want you to be whole and well. Three also represents the Trinity: Creator, Christ and Spirit. (Plus, here's an aside, when thinking in three's, I just learned that Steve Jobs' very last words were: "O wow, O wow, O wow.")

2000: That is the number of dollars one Church member recently contributed to the Pastor's Discretionary Fund for me to give away to poor people in need.

5: That is the number of Seminary Students and Interns this Church has sponsored, mentored and nurtured over the last six years. Five is also the number of steps up the stairs from our parking lot to the back door of the Church. When I bound up those stairs, many times per week, and on Sunday mornings, I am always happy to be here and to see you.

120: That's the average number of people in Church every Sunday...and YOU those 120 people give an average of \$2000 per week. That is what is collected weekly in the Offering plates.

10: That's the number of hours per week that Vicha is paid to be my Administrative Assistant. 15 is the actually average number of hours she works.

1,197: That's the number of people, according to Church historian Kathleen Kent who poured over old records, who have joined this church EVER since the Church was founded in 1851. Of that 1197, 169 have joined since 2005.

4: That's the number of tires on my Prius, my little Prius that takes me to Linda Manor, Cooley Dickinson Hospital, Mass General, Brigham and Women's, Bay State and to your homes and farms to visit you.

6,543: That is the number that one family in this Church, not a wealthy family, decided to donate to the Stewardship Campaign after Kayla said: "Our goal this year is \$126,543....what part of that number is yours to give?" The family is donating \$6,543 IN ADDITION TO their pledge for 2012.

7: Just about 7 days a week this Church is full of activity...Deacons' meetings, Trustees meeting, Peace and Justice, Thursday Night Live, Fridays at Four, Loose Ends, Choir Practice, Children's Church Council Meetings, Church Book Group, Men's Book Group, Girl Scouts, Ladies Aid. And YOU have made this place your second home. People come during the week and clean the kitchen, make tea, visit, sit in our little library. Most of us are not wealthy enough to have a second home and you treat this Church as your second home. It is so touching.

98: That's the total number of light bulbs on the inside and the outside of this Church building. 98 light bulbs that our Sexton Kathy changes. Light bulbs that we pay for with our pledges.

22: That's the number of years our Diane Scott served as Choir Director at this Church.

10: That's the number of news-filled, poem-filled, graphics-filled newsletters Val produces for us every year. My Clergy Bible Study says ours is "an award winning Church newsletter." I think it should win awards. Your pledges pay for the printing and stamps.

8: That's the Goal I set for the 8 FOR 8 Campaign...I wanted to find 7 other people to join me in giving 8% of their income as their pledge to the Church in 2012. I talked a lot about this campaign and hoped we would make the 8. Well the 8 FOR 8 campaign did not make our goal. We exceeded it!! It is now the 9 for 8 campaign! NINE of you are pledging 8% of your income to this Church in 2012. Wow!

144,000: That's the number, according to the Book of Revelation, Chapter 7 who are blessed and saintly in God's eyes. Revelation gives a concrete number for those who get to be especially blessed...and it is specifically 144,000 and only 144,000. Well we are part of the United Church of Christ and we believe that God is still speaking and our still speaking God is still loving and still blessing us all....we believe we are ALL among the communion of Saints, we are all priests, servants and ministers. We do not believe the 144,000 number found in the Bible is the last word. We believe God blesses and loves us all...and that there are a countless number of saints.

26: That's the number of pews in this Sanctuary. You come Sunday after Sunday and sit in these hard pews to sing, pray, hear the Word preached and connect with each other. You come tired and cranky, seeking, fearful, happy, bored, hung-over, depressed, weary, wondering, delighted and rested, you come just as you are. You come week after week and sit in these hard upright Puritan pews...because God calls you back again and again, and because you know we love you and we miss you when you are not here. You come faithfully to these 26 pews.

40: That's a key number in the Bible...it rained for 40 days and 40 nights, Moses was on the mountain 40 days, the Israelites wandered for 40 years, Jesus fasted in the wilderness for 40 days and was seen on the earth for 40 days after His crucifixion. 40 is also the number of people who came this past week to Fred Goodhue's presentation on the

Williamsburg dam breaking in 1874. You are faithful about coming to Church programs and events. Bless your hearts.

And the final number is 1:

1 person in our congregation recently donated \$200 for the Church to buy 1 Djembe African drum for our Sarah Icklan to play in worship services;

1 There are \$1 dollar bills in all of your Bulletins this morning for you to give away...the only catch is that you must be an anonymous giver. So stick the bill in a library book you are about to return, hide it under a can of soup at Stop and Shop; slip it in the open guitar case of a street musician when his back is turned; leave it in a chair in one of the waiting areas at Cooley Dickinson Hospital, turn it into quarters and fill parking meters in downtown Northampton. Give the dollar away, anonymously and notice how it feels to be quietly generous.

1: remember to the world you are one person, but to at least one person you are the world. You are the world to God, and to us. You are loved and cherished by God....always and forever. And you mean the world to us, your Church family. We love you and will stand by you through thick and thin.

1 We are one Church family. We worship one God together.

"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." Deuteronomy 6:4

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Galatians 3:28

On their last night together at supper, Jesus gathered his disciples and lifted this petition to God, "I pray that they may all be one, just as you and I are one-as you are in me, Father, and I am in you." John 17:21.

We are one in the Spirit. We are one united as God's family.

And so my dearest Sisters and Brothers, what do all these numbers say about us, the Haydenville Congregational Church family? I think they say 10 things:

1. We are an active Church.
2. We are a growing Church.
3. We work hard.
4. We are deeply connected to one another and to God.

5. We are big hearted.
6. We are a not-huge Church with a pretty-huge program.
7. We care about people outside the walls of this Sanctuary.
8. We love our Church.
9. We are generous.
10. We love God.

Amen.