

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
November 14, 2010
Matthew 6:19-21

Stewardship Sunday
“Building the Beloved Community”

*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.*

Last month, I decided that I wanted to give myself something special for my birthday. After some thought, I decided (partly because I was out of business cards) that I would make new business cards. That does not sound very special but I know a wonderfully creative, innovative, and edgy graphic artist—my friend Phyllis—and I knew it would be fun to work with her, and I would end up with unusual business cards.

My old business cards were no-frills utilitarian—white and efficient. When I showed them to Phyllis she dismissed them as boring. “I don’t make business cards that are the normal size,” she announced, “and I don’t use white. Plus I like experimenting with different fonts. I think the card should convey a lot about the person. Your new business cards won’t be anything like your old ones,” she said.

When Phyllis and I met at the Church to discuss my cards, she wanted a complete tour. She loved the Sanctuary, she was intrigued by my office, and she read everything on the Dining Room walls. When we sat down after the tour, Phyllis said to me, “Give me some words that describe this church and your ministry.” Quite spontaneously I said: “justice-seeking, peace-loving, gay-affirming, anti-racist, child-centered, song-filled, ever thankful, stubbornly hopeful.”

A week later Phyllis gave me my new cards and I love them—you have one tucked in each of your Bulletins. A few weeks after that, I went to a clergy gathering in Sturbridge. There I connected with a colleague I had not seen in months. “Let’s stay in touch,” he said when we parted. “Here’s my card,” I said in return.

My colleague took the card, read both sides, turned it over a couple of times and then said to me, “You’re building the beloved community.”
“Yes,” I said. “Together all of us at the Church, we’re building the beloved community.”

Friends, today is Stewardship Sunday. I am supposed to talk to you about money, and I will, and about you making a generous pledge to this church for 2011. And I will get there too. But THE MOST important thing I will say in this sermon, the most important thing I will tell you on this Stewardship Sunday is what my colleague said when he read my card: we are building the beloved community.

Imagine! It was just from reading a business card that my colleague made that statement and he hit the nail on the head. He had not been in church with us, had not heard the Welcome we say each Sunday, had not seen you stand, speak, and weep during Sermon Response Time. He had not walked through the back door and gotten a hug the minute he entered the Church, had not seen how you come up with tears in your eyes to receive Communion by Intinction, he did not know of the leadership and generosity of our Ladies Aid, he had not heard about our Charity to Change group and their programs and suppers, our Peace and Justice group and their speakers, films and suppers, our vibrant Children's Church with the Godly Play curriculum, he did not know about our Angel Take-Out for people in need, our Blue Moon Sunday community service projects to serve the wider community, our First Light Bible Study series, our Fridays at Four Writing Group, our intergenerational garden, our Shepherds group. He did not know that we march and sing—some 60 people strong—in the Gay Pride March every May in Northampton. He was not know about our Church Camp this summer with 52 of us on the Cape and what a transforming experience that was for all involved. My colleague experienced NONE OF THAT. And still, from one business card he knew the truth about us and he spoke the truth about us. We ARE building the beloved community. And THAT is what you are supporting when you make a pledge to this Church.

Our theme for our Stewardship Campaign is the well known and well loved passage from the Gospel of Matthew: “for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Like so many United Church of Christ churches all across this country, we are using the UCC theme for our Campaign this year.

Listen again to the passage from Matthew 6 as Jesus speaks these simple words of wisdom:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

I have known and loved this passage for a long time; this is a famous and often-quoted passage. But if you remember, when we began our Stewardship Campaign a month ago and we unveiled the treasure chest here in the Sanctuary, I mixed up the words, I actually said the passage wrong...do you remember? I mistakenly reversed the order of what Jesus said! That day when we unveiled the treasure chest I mis-spoke and said, "...where your heart is, there your treasure will be also." But Jesus was too smart to say that—that's too easy and straight-forward! And it is not what he meant.

Jesus was saying LOOK AT where you "spend" or invest your time, talent and treasure...that will show you what you love, that's where your heart is.

We could talk about investing our time and our talent in our Church but today we are focusing on where we invest our treasure!

By using the UCC theme, this passage from Matthew, we are being asked to look at how we choose to spend our hard-earned income because where we place or invest our treasure reveals what we value.

Where we spend our treasure reveals where our heart is.

And so, like the members of our faithful Stewardship Committee, I decided that if I was going to help lead this Stewardship Campaign, I'd better take a hard look at how I spent MY money. I knew it would reveal where my heart is and what I value. And so I took a good, long look at my own checkbook and credit card statement.

(TAKE OUT CHECKBOOK AND CREDIT CARD STATEMENT)

Wow. Both reveal a lot about who I am and what I value.

(Here's an aside...I have heard it said that integrity is evident by what you do when no one is looking. I would say character is evident by reviewing your checkbook register and your credit card statement—if you have a credit card.)

My checkbook and credit card statements reveal where my heart is and what I value. And when I study them, it is clear that I value food. I spend a lot of my treasure on food—not food to cook but food in restaurants. I spend a lot of my treasure eating out. Hm-m-m-m-m-m-m-m. That's interesting.

My checkbook and credit card statements also reveal that I value shoes.

Because my partner and I have separate bank accounts and keep separate money, I told him of this observation. Michael, I really seem to value shoes, I told him.

I spend a surprising amount of money on shoes.

What's surprising about that, he said in return, is that you always seem to wear the same shoes...clogs!

Yes I said but clogs come in many colors and styles!

When I study my checkbook and my credit card statements I see that I also value our house....both Michael and I spend a lot of our treasure keeping our house clean, safe, fixed up, and repaired.

AND when I study my checkbook, it is perfectly clear that I value this Church. Week after week, there are checks written to the Haydenville Congregational Church so that I can fulfill my pledge to my church. This year, 2010, I pledged 8% of my take-home salary to the Church. What a relief it is to see that those checks keep appearing in my check register. I don't have to feel like a totally restaurant-going, shoe-shopping shallow person.

Where our TREASURE is, there our HEART will be also. Where we spend our money reveals what we value and something about who we are.

Listen again to the same passage from Matthew from the translation of the Bible called **THE MESSAGE** by Eugene Peterson:

Don't hoard treasure down here where it gets eaten by moths and corroded by rust or—worse!—stolen by burglars. Stockpile treasure in heaven, where it's safe from moth and rust and burglars. It's obvious, isn't it? The place where your treasure is, is the place you will most want to be, and end up being.

I love Peterson's translation because it does seem obvious and true.

The place where your treasure (money, assets) is is the place you most want to be and end up being. Jesus (and Peterson in this translation) is talking about heaven but I am talking about life on earth and heaven on earth which is what our churches are, at their best, in their most glorious moments. Where our treasure is, where we invest financially, is also where we invest emotionally, spiritually and physically—and where we end up being.

And this Church is where you end up being a lot.

So many of you are in this Church A LOT. You are not just here for worship, you are here for dinners and sing-alongs, and DVD discussion series, and knitting groups, and Choir, and Deacons Meetings and Trustees Meetings and Children's Church Committee meetings and the Church Book Group, and the Crop Walk and the Church Fair. You're here to mow the lawn, tend the grounds, clean up the kitchen, fix up the library, and change some filter thingy in the furnace. And the list goes on. You LOVE this place, so it is where you end up BEING a lot.

I know you love this Church and I want to talk to you directly about your giving generously to support this Church. To do that I want to use a point William Green makes in his book 52 WAYS TO IGNITE YOUR CONGREGATION'S GENEROUS GIVING.

I like Green's book BUT there is one part that I disagree with.

On page 107 Green says this: "Generosity doesn't always feel good. It can ask a lot of us. Sometimes generosity is eager, willing, and enthusiastic; sometimes it is more a matter of duty or responsibility. In no case is it simply centered in personal emotion."

I disagree with Green and I want to repeat what I told you LAST November on Stewardship Sunday. I want to encourage you NOT to give to this church if you are giving, as Green says, out of a matter of duty or sense of responsibility. I want you to give to this Church and give generously not because you feel you should but because you actively and actually WANT to give generously to this Church.

Friends, generosity is one of the fruits of the spirit that Paul talks about in the Book of Galatians. I believe that if this place and what we are doing here and what you are experiencing here matter deeply to you, it will feel good to give to the Church. It should feel good to give to the Church. Furthermore, I think it not only feels GOOD to give to the Church but I think it is good for us. It is good for us to give money away, it is good for us to make a pledge and a promise to a Church that we love, and if we do that with a happy, open, willing and eager heart, it is good for our soul, our spirit and our blood pressure. If the church has to pry your hands off your closed wallet and your firmly shut checkbook and you give with resentment, under pressure, or because you feel forced...please don't give. We will meet our budget somehow or we'll adjust our budget to face that reality that people are resistant about their giving. Truly. As we have said before: don't give until it hurts. Give only if and until it feels really really good. Give with a glad heart. Give because you love this place and the people and the worship and the welcome. Give because you love God and God is your rock and God gives your life meaning.

Often, when we share Communion I say: we come to the table not because we must but because we may. Today I say to you: we give to our church not because we must but because we may.

I am happy to be a member of such a fabulous Church. I love this place and all of you and your feisty-ness, quirks, gifts, strengths and adorable behaviors and how easily you laugh and cry and how deeply you pray. I love you and this place. And I am happy to make a generous pledge to this Church.

Friends, one more book and I'll quit! This one is called FIVE PRACTICES OF FRUITFUL CONGREGATIONS.

The author, Robert Schnase says that there are five distinct practices that are consistently evident in healthy, vital and growing congregations. These practices are: radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development, risk-taking mission and service, and EXTRAVAGANT GENEROSITY.

I know this church well and I know you well and I think we get pretty high marks on the first four of the five practices of fruitful congregations. If you read this book, you will find a lot of US in it!

And, if this year's Stewardship Campaign is like the Stewardship Campaigns of 2009 and 2008 and 2007 and so on, we also get high marks in the final practice of fruitful congregations...extravagant generosity.

Extravagant generosity. It's not something we do. It's something we are.

Look again at my new business card. It may be MY business card but actually it reflects OUR CHURCH and OUR SHARED MINISTRY. WE are:

*justice-seeking
peace-loving
gay-affirming
anti-racist
child-centered
song-filled
ever thankful
and
stubbornly hopeful.*

We are building the beloved community...
with dedication and with love.

We are building the beloved community...
by investing our time AND our talents AND our treasure.

Amen.