

Stewardship Sunday
Deut 26: 1-10; Phil 4: 4-20; Mt 22: 1-10

It might be off-putting for someone like you or me to learn that rusty metal boxes stationed beneath the exit signs of a church are intended to receive a congregation's offering. For the people of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, MI, that's just the way it is. Mars Hill is the megachurch formed in 1999 by contemporary evangelical icon, Rob Bell. Many of us have watched the Rob Bell tapes and became fans from the start. So have the people who've worshiped with him for twelve years. Mars Hill has become a place for "(p)eople hungry to live out the way of Jesus."¹

They'll tell you that they're not about money. But that'll only come up if someone curious or skeptical – or disgusted – asks. Not unlike a lot of Protestants, people at Mars Hill shrink from chatter about contributions. There, instead of a traditional call to offering, passing of the plate and prayerful response, the people of Mars Hill just put their offerings in simple, rusty boxes placed near exit signs around the church. If you go to the Mars Hill website, you'll learn more.

Here's what it says:

As a community, we take joy in the ways our faith is made stronger through giving and receiving together. There is a satisfaction that comes from following Jesus' example of generosity toward those most in need, and it is a privilege to use our resources to continue telling God's story and help bring measurable change in the world. Share in this joy by giving financially to Mars Hill. Throughout our facility you'll find tall, slightly rusty, slotted metal Joy Boxes. Drop your donation in one of them at any time, or log in and visit our online Joy Box to give a one-time or reoccurring donation...²

While it might seem downright disrespectful to you and to me that rusty metal boxes stationed beneath the exit signs of a church are about the only way to receive the congregation's offering, for the people of Mars Hill, that's just the way it is.

At Willow Creek, another prominent megachurch near Chicago, the word about money is a little more out there. Their Pastor, Bill Hybels, says something like this each service: "If you're visiting with us today, we're glad to have you as our guest. Please don't feel any obligation to participate in this part of the service. In fact, we hope you'll consider the service as our gift to you. This offering is an opportunity for those of us who are regular attenders to invest tangibly in what God is doing here."³ Any visitors at First Pres? We don't say that here. Your money's always welcome.

¹ <http://marshill.org/give/>

² <http://marshill.org/give/>

³ Lee Strobel. *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary: How to Reach Friends and Family Who Avoid God and The Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House. 1993. 206.

Lack of focus on money is a characteristic of most contemporary churches. Money, like politics, is a tough topic. We all know that. So, sidestepping the whole conversation is a way to address what a Gallup Poll uncovered is a belief that the church “has too much concern for money.”⁴ The shift among contemporary churches to either remove the collection of the offering from worship or relegate this element of worship to a gimmick for cash collection is a way to confront an underlying notion that the church is trying to “fleece” worshipers. The contemporary crowd says even eliminating the offering is a small price for the potential to increase the number of people who worship God. Members just have to participate a little more intentionally. Funny thing? Some how, the bills get paid and profound ministries around the community as well as around the globe succeed. Attenders feel it in their bones that God is working at Mars Hill and Willow Creek and Saddleback and even the Vineyard churches around the New York metropolitan area. With or without a call to offering, people there want to be a part of it all. They want to see God’s work. They dig deep without ever being asked. It’s a cultural thing.

Now, while this might seem like a shocker to some of us (I’m thinking about Chris, Frank, Nora and Jennifer – let alone Paul Knipp, our Elder for Stewardship) the idea of no offering during worship is hardly new. You might not be surprised to learn that in the time of the Reformation, there really wasn’t a regular offering taken. The work of the church was funded by the state. This pretty much took away the need for church members to make regular financial contributions.

As people headed for the New World and formed congregations in the US, independent funding of churches was sealed as the norm. Offerings became necessary for the care of the poor and for funding the operations of the church. Conversations about a Christian’s scripturally grounded responsibility to make financial gifts necessarily evolved and the collection became included in the order of worship as a practical necessity with theological importance. Virtually everyone went to some form of church. Virtually everyone gave a contribution. And virtually all needs were met.

But you know as well as I that in recent years church membership, attendance, and participation has softened across this no longer new world. Many of us’ve wrestled over whether worship services should be redesigned so that we might be able to draw more inactive members and unchurched people to the church. Studying the numerically successful megachurches, some of our mainstream Presbyterian churches have begun to incorporate some rather evangelical practices to see if we might be able to grow and be strong once again like they are now. And yes, as part of that conversation, some have begun to reconsider the role of the collection of financial offerings in the order of worship. Do you suppose that would fly at First Pres?

As we explore the historical, theological role of the offering in protestant worship today, what happens when we ask, “Is some version of the offering a necessary component in protestant worship today?” If we consider this morning’s scripture lessons, I think we have to agree, “yes.” And when I layer atop of God’s ancient word our cultural bias against abundant giving, the answer is even stronger. Generosity is at the core of this morning’s readings. And so is judgment. Generosity, judgment and a bias against abundant giving. What a combination for Stewardship Sunday.

⁴ Strobel, 206.

One of our preaching colleagues from South Carolina⁵ claims that if you wrestle with Matthew's parable through the night, it'll leave you limping by morning. Even Martin Luther didn't like preaching on the parable of the wedding feast. For most of us, this is a scripture lesson we'd rather skip. Instead, we'd rather think about the CROP walk and the Giants game this afternoon. We'd rather think about the painted pumpkins and Halloween jewelry the youth are selling downstairs and the Halloween party and costume parade they're planning for the little kids. Heck, we'd rather talk about *Stewardship* over God's wrath and judgment. The bells have been ringing and we're enjoying life too much to gnash our teeth.

But the odd gift of the lectionary is that it doesn't give us much freedom to dodge difficult scriptures, just like for those of us in a church with bills to pay, it's hard to dodge giving money to the offering. If we follow the lectionary, we give up total control over eliminating passages that refuse to be tamed by our interpretative tools, or our short stories, or our jokes. Now, there are those of us who view the Christian life through the lens of God's final judgment. We're the ones who divide the world into those who do things right and those who don't. If we think this way, we probably think of *ourselves* in the blessed category. We're the ones who're probably not struggling too much with this parable. But for all of us who're theological wrestlers – all of us who sit in Adult Nurture on a Wednesday evening like this last one and talk about heaven and all of those important concepts of a Christian life – we still have to come to terms with why the guest who was pulled in off the streets at the last minute was later kicked out of the party for not wearing the right clothes. How can we understand this apparent failure of grace in what seems to be an amazingly open party of God?

Our own John Calvin and plenty of others taught that the guy ejected from the banquet represented the ones who don't "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 13:14 and Gal. 3:27). They would say that we're all invited to the kingdom, but we're all under obligation to be clothed with Christ and to live lives of righteousness. We're under obligation to be pure and honorable, just and pleasing. We're under obligation to show concern for others. And we're under obligation to be generous, rejoicing in the Lord knowing that God will fully satisfy every need.

While most of us would say that we try to live this lifestyle of Christ, we actually are living like big, rusty boxes. We rest on promises of yesterday that are worn out from overuse and under-delivery. We rely on the goodness we hold in our hearts but fail to send out into the world. We lock ourselves up tight and fail to notice that we're becoming fused shut because we neglect to open them up, work the hinges and share from the riches that God has placed inside. And so, yes, over time what was once a clean and active Christian outpouring of self and situation becomes a bit rusty, sitting in the pew believing in your heart of hearts that it's someone else's turn to take care of things. It's like we're stationed beneath an exit sign ourselves, no longer genuinely engaged in the strengthening of the church or the furtherance of Christ's mission on earth through our activity in or out of the church – especially our giving.

Many of us could use some work on our generosity. We operate from a position of disregard, disgust or desperation rather than from a position of abundance. We live lives of want rather than plenty. We especially find ourselves feeling skeptical or looking a bit sideways at anyone who asks for contributions to serve whatever purpose and we quietly batten the hatches for fear of being taken advantage of. The church, in some of our minds, becomes just one more

⁵ Mary Anderson, "Living by the Word," from *Christian Century*, October 4, 2011. 20.

pot to fill. Rather than wonder how grand we can be in serving Christ's mission to the world, we wonder how much we really have to give this year so that the church has a chance at meeting its budget. We have limiting thoughts. We dismiss the idea that there's enough to go around and we end up like the guy without the wedding robe – not quite ready for anything much and certainly not worthy to feast in God's kingdom.

Back to our pastor friend from South Carolina who's admittedly been wrestling a lot with the parable of the wedding feast right along with the rest of us. She reminds us of what bible scholars say. "Parables work best when we stop working so hard to interpret them and allow them to interpret us."⁶ None of us knows with absolute certainty what this parable tells us. But we do know that we need to take our spiritual clothing seriously. We know to be righteous. We know to be pure and honorable, just and pleasing. We know to set our minds on what is excellent. We know to show concern for others. And we know to be generous. We know we're to be generous with the hungry and to be generous to all of those in need. And we know that such generosity extends from the church and our active involvement within it as a call from God to the people of God to be shared with this generation and the next.

Some of us need to hear the call, and for all of our dismissing or suspicion over the contemporary worship crowd, some of us just seem to feel it in our bones and give 'til our heart's content not focusing on what it'll take to meet the budget but channeling in on how generous we can possibly be in order to help this particular church live into the vision of the feast where all are fed.

This morning, when you are completing your pledge card, ask yourself, "How am I wearing the clothing of Christ?" Think on these things. Let the parable work on you and extend yourself as a person of abundance toward this life and the next. Amen.

⁶ Anderson, 20.