

## NO THANKS

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

November 15, 2009

Scripture: Leviticus 19:9-14; II Corinthians 9:1-15

There is a now familiar story about Alfred Nobel whose name reminds us of those exceptional prizes which are given for accomplishment in the fields of medicine, chemistry, physics, economics, literature, and peace. It is said that Nobel, late in his life, read a premature obituary about himself in a French newspaper one morning and was surprised not only to read of his death, but also to see that the most memorable accomplishment noted in his obituary was the immense financial gain he enjoyed from the invention of dynamite, and the development of it for the purposes of making war.

It was a most unflattering and condemning obituary whose headline was *Le marchand de la mort est mort*, “the Merchant of Death is Dead”. The article went on to say, “Dr. Alfred Nobel, who became rich by finding ways to kill more people faster than ever before, died yesterday.”

Sobered by this apparent legacy, it is said, Nobel resolved to do something that would redeem his name and that would be associated with peace and peacemaking. So he became the generous benefactor of the Nobel Prizes for humanitarian endeavors, including the Peace Prize.

Nobel’s story raises the question for all of us as to what it is for which we wish to be remembered. Did we do something noble and good with what we were given, or did we simply go through life giving no thanks for the blessings we have received and simply raked in what we could while it lasted?

These days we live on the uncertain edge between abundance and scarcity. Some of you have lost your jobs, or live each day concerned about the possibility of losing it. Some of you have downsized and pulled in the reins on spending. Others of you are working incredibly long hours, because the work force is stretched to the max; everyone afraid to hire more workers now that productivity is up, and fearing that until things settle down, no one who is hired today can be assured of anything tomorrow. Better to be conservative and not hire anyone, the reasoning goes, than to be too optimistic and fire workers that cannot be sustained.

So everyone in the workforce is working harder as we wait for the signs of improvement to take hold. In this in-between time, we live and spend our resources cautiously; for fear that we may run out.

But this anxiety about not having enough is neither new to us, nor to our time. Paul in writing to the small community of new Christians in Corinth knew what it was to point people to the abundance which God had supplied them rather than live out of the fear of scarcity.

Paul urges those Corinthians not to live recklessly, nor to throw their money away, but to live in the confidence that they will have enough, enough to live on, enough to share, because God is a God of abundance whose blessings are bountiful.

Walter Bruggemann picks up this theme in discussing the conflicting narratives of scarcity and abundance in an article in *The Christian Century*. He writes:

The baptismal service declares that each of us has been miraculously loved into existence by God. And the story of abundance says that our lives will end in God, and that this well-being cannot be taken from us. In the words of St. Paul, neither life nor death nor angels nor principalities nor things -- nothing can separate us from God.

What we know about our beginnings and our endings, then, creates a different kind of present tense for us. We can live according to an ethic whereby we are not driven, controlled, anxious, frantic or greedy, precisely because we are sufficiently at home and at peace to care about others as we have been cared for.<sup>1</sup>

Paul puts it this way, “The one who sows sparingly will reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will reap bountifully. ...God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work, ...for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.”

If you understand your life to be lived both in its coming and in its going within the tender mercy and loving care of God, from whom we came and to whom we return, then we can afford to live with confidence and with hope, giving thanks to God with our lives and with our offerings of self and substance.

Paul in this second letter to the Corinthians spends the better part of two chapters on the offering that the Corinthian church is taking for the sake of the poor in Jerusalem. Evidently this was an outreach mission, an attempt on Paul’s part to unite Jews and Gentiles in the emerging church that he envisioned, and the offering was a symbol and tangible expression of the unity that he believed should be its hallmark.

Paul felt that those who had much owed much; so sharing that abundance was good for all and good for the soul. And I like Paul’s reasoning. He says that it is important for the Corinthians to give what they *have*, not what they *do not have*. Which means that they are not asked to give *beyond* their means, but only to be generous *within* their means.

Most of us if we overcome the anxiety of giving away some of what we have, then try to convince ourselves that what we have is not important, that the little bit that it may represent in comparison to others is not enough. While in truth, generosity is always proportional, it is a measure of the gratitude you feel for what you have, and lays aside concern for what you do not have. No one but you yourself can determine whether what you give is enough. That is because generosity is measured not so much in what you give, but in what you keep and why.

Why all this talk about giving and keeping, scarcity and abundance? Well its stewardship season and its time for us once again as a church to be thinking practically about the year that lies ahead, asking our members and friends to support the work and ministry of the church.

I realize that this year the stewardship appeal, which begins today is coming in a year when we have already had one Celebration Sunday giving thanks for the many commitments from our members and friends that have pledged \$11.5 million over the next five years to improve the Mellin Macnab Building. We have a ways to go yet on that goal of \$15M, but I am hopeful that we will close that gap over the next year.

It's important to understand that that campaign was a capital campaign, an exceptional request for an exceptional project with a multi-year payment period and a long term approach to a major need.

But that appeal is separate and different from the annual expense of operating the church, keeping the doors open, lighting and heating the building, serving the community, providing for worship, employing the staff, carrying out mission, providing a church school on Sundays for our children, supporting our choir, underwriting the Caring Community, overseeing the homeless shelter. All of those are expenses supported by the annual operating budget of the church.

Because this has been a year in which there was a capital campaign, and because some people have been confused that their pledge to the capital campaign was their only pledge needed to support the church, your Stewardship Committee decided to call this year's fall stewardship canvass, "The Annual Fund," to differentiate and set apart the annual operating expenses needed to support the church, from the capital expenses to do a major renovation of the Mellin Macnab Building.

So let me say a bit about the Annual Fund for First Church, its purpose, and its goals.

First of all, this may look like a rich, old Avenue church from the outside and inside, but in truth it is always approximately one budget year away from extinction. We didn't need a depletion of the value of our endowment during this economic downturn to make that clear. The church operates on a \$2.5 Million annual budget. 57% of our income is from you, our members and friends who pledge and contribute \$1.5 million a year. Our pledge goal is \$1.25M, and the balance comes from general offerings; non-pledged gifts like loose plate offerings.

22% of the annual income, or almost \$600,000, comes from use of the building, the fees paid for expenses by organizations who use our facilities and whose mission is compatible with ours. This includes the Nursery School, PS226, the Caring Community which we also underwrite, Good Shepherd Services, the Bethel Ethiopian Church, the Twelve Step groups, and other organizations all of which call First Church their home.

Finally, 21% of the income for annual expenses this year comes from the endowment, about \$560,000, which is conservatively invested by our Trustees and which

represents the legacy of all those who have gone before us who have trusted that we will keep this church strong and faithful long after their lives were over.

That endowment is valued at roughly \$12.5 million. Not enough money to produce the necessary income needed to maintain our buildings properly, or fund mission, or help us do anything extra. At 1/5<sup>th</sup> of the annual income, it is an important component of putting the budget together each year, but it in no way takes the place of our present members shouldering the greatest portion of the church's expenses. And that's the way it should be.

We are fortunate to have an active, younger, congregation which is able to provide the necessary support to keep the church vital, active, and growing. While endowments help in lean years, and even out the troughs and valleys, they are not meant to be the main component of the church's income stream. The living and active members of the church have the responsibility of keeping the church strong and solvent today.

What does the church do with the money you give it? It provides a home to the many organizations that meet here, for one thing. It welcomes kids with special needs every day as the autistic children of PS226 come in our doors Monday through Friday. It expresses our commitment to early childhood education as we sponsor one of the best Nursery Schools in Lower Manhattan. It provides a place where ten homeless men spend cold winter nights sleeping in warmth and safety. It provides a place where an after school program for kids from PS 41 can come for tutoring and recreation until their parents can pick them up on their way home from work.

A portion of the budget goes to salaries, to the people who keep the building clean, and operate the business office; to the pastors and the choir director and the youth music director. And their work is translated into hours spent providing care for a large and growing congregation who worships and serves and learns together. They counsel, and lead programs to meet the needs of others. They visit you in the hospital and are there when there's a death in the family. They celebrate the births and baptisms and marriages of a family's life.

They preach and teach and pray with the congregation, and help you express your faith in daily life. So even the salaries of the church's employees is rendered into service within the congregation and community.

Just think about the ways this church touches the life of you and your family. The Christmas Eve service when the church is darkened and filled with only candlelight as we sing *Silent Night, Holy Night*. Think about the kids sitting on the steps here for the children's prayer each week, or standing here on Thanksgiving Eve singing a song about peace with the kids from the Village Temple choir.

Think about Easter morning and the church full of Easter lilies, the hope that we celebrate in the resurrection and the confidence that it gives us in faith. Think about the peace and quiet of this place with its doors open and its silent solace on September 11<sup>th</sup>,

2001. On that day, everyone in this neighborhood, and everyone finding their way home knew where to come.

Think about the families and people that you know here, the over three hundred children who are under the age of five who are a part of the life of this church. The young families, and the retirees side by side who join the church every few months. The older members whose wisdom and constancy in this house add to its character and strength. The GLBT members who find a place of welcome here, and the growing number of same sex parents who know that we have a broad definition of family in this church and a welcome mat as wide as the doors.

It's an urban church with all the rainbow of colors and ethnicities and ages and economic circumstances within it. And we come here because individually and collectively we want to live a better life, a life that is accountable to God, a life of faith rooted in the confidence that God stands at both the beginning and the end of life and at all times in between.

Which brings me back to Alfred Nobel, and the question of how we want to be remembered in life and how we account for our days. There are two ways to go through life, and one is to live out of scarcity, out of a sense of never having enough, out of a fear that whatever you have is running out. To live like that is to live a life that pushes away thankfulness. Because all your energy and thought is given over to survival, strategizing on how to move yourself forward, competing for the limited resources that are available. The whole *Survivor* television series is a parable of that kind of living. Living with no thanks.

The other way to live is with thankfulness to God for the gift of life, and for all things; believing that God never ceases to provide for us all that we need and even more. Life lived in that way is life lived in community. Life lived in trust. Life open to others. Life lived in the church... where others like you join together to make possible a community where abundance is celebrated and shared and thereby multiplied.

One way to express that thankfulness is to make a pledge of financial support to the church over the next year to sustain the programs and ministries and mission that are carried on here every day. The Biblical tithe is ten percent of your income.

Nationally Presbyterians give about five percent of their income to a variety of causes and the majority of that to the church. But no one can tell you *what* you should be giving... only *that* you should.

I know in my own experience that giving in this way is a spiritual discipline. That I stretch and grow in *faith* when I make a commitment with my checkbook that expresses the commitment of my heart.

There are pledge cards in the pew today, and pledge cards on their way to your home if they have not already arrived. I'm going to ask you to give prayerful thought to your commitment and send back that pledge card, either in today's offering plate, or in the mail before Thanksgiving, which seems like a good reminder date.

By doing so, in rendering this support, to borrow the words of St. Paul, you will “not only supply the needs of the saints but also overflow with many thanksgivings to God.” And what better remembrance of the accomplishments of our life might be noted about any of us than exactly that?

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<sup>1</sup> Brueggemann, "The Liturgy of Abundance". *Christian Century*, March 24-31, 1999.