

## “GREAT RESPONSIBILITY”

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Mark Hostetter

The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York  
January 31, 2021

Scripture: Luke 12: 34 & 48b

Today’s scripture lesson is from Luke 12: verses 34 & 48, and we’ll be reading from the New Revised Standard Version. Listen for the word of the Lord.

Verse 34: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

And verse 48: "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded."

Our annual congregational meeting is today after worship, and for these three Sundays beginning today, we’ll be focusing on abundance as we lead up to our final Pledge Sunday on February 14<sup>th</sup>. Last year for our stewardship season, we highlighted the first scripture verse we read this morning: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." You’ll remember those words of Jesus. They come at us sort of unexpectedly. They’re turned around from what it seems like it should be. It’s not where your heart is, that’s where you’ll keep your treasure. No, instead Jesus tells us that where we keep, where we put our treasure, our resources, that’s where our hearts will be also. I guess it’s like a detective on a TV drama whose mantra, whose technique, is to follow the money. Wherever we place our priorities, wherever we spend our money, whatever goals we put our resources towards, that’s where our life’s focus will be, where our hearts will spend the most time. An important lesson, and some very practical advice, for sure.

But this year, we’re looking at abundance and what that means. And we have a slightly different focus in today’s second scripture verse: "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded."

I had a big smile on my face when I began to reflect on today’s verse, and I laughed aloud when I realized it was Jesus talking about Spiderman. It’s the Peter Parker principle, named after Spiderman’s secret real identity, a saying so familiar to us: “With great power comes great responsibility.” I guess Stan Lee’s comic book theology seems like it owes at least a footnote to Jesus, don’t you think?

Well, it turns out that it’s not just Stan Lee that followed in Jesus’ footsteps here either, and a lot of these “great responsibility” philosophers pre-date Peter Parker. The French National Convention, coming on the heels of the French Revolution, in 1793 adopted a principle that government representatives must hold fast to the belief that great responsibility is the inseparable partner of great power. Just 25 years later in 1817, the British Parliament recorded the view that “the possession of great power necessarily implies great responsibility.” And Winston Churchill, as Undersecretary of the Colonial Office a century later in 1906, echoed that long-accepted principle with the words “where there is great power, there is great responsibility.”

It’s an American thing too, beyond Spiderman and the advice that Peter Parker got from his Uncle Ben. There’s the very first episode of the Superman serial in 1948 where Clark Kent’s foster father tells him “because of your great powers – your speed and strength, your x-ray vision and super-sensitive hearing – you have great responsibility.” Even the United States Supreme Court used the same quote in a majority

opinion by Elena Kagan in 2017, in a case involving a Spiderman toy for royalties on expired patents, saying that the Supreme Court can overturn its own precedents but that the justices should do so sparingly. With great power, comes great responsibility.

And it seems that no one gives Jesus the credit for the concept. Well, we know it. Hear again Jesus' words: "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded."

There's something that every New Yorker, from the youngest to the oldest, knows about our subway system. And that's the third rail, that rail that runs along the side of the track, maybe six, eight inches off the ground, that supplies electricity to power the trains. We all know that you never, never ever, touch the third rail, right? It's a high voltage danger. But of course, the third rail is necessary for the trains to operate.

Preachers' sermons on money and stewardship are often approached like that third rail, something to be avoided at all costs. And I don't know many pastors or elders, or members for that matter, who really look forward to asking for money. We don't want to focus on money. We somehow think the bible tells us that money is the root of all evil. And for sure we don't want to be thought of as a prosperity gospel preacher, who yells out from the pulpit, "Give generously to the church, and riches will come your way. God will shower you with prosperity for your generosity." That's certainly *not* our theology. Plus, in polite society, it's just one of those taboo subjects too, isn't it?

I remember a funny story about money and church. There once was a strongman at a circus sideshow who demonstrated his power, his strength, before large audiences every night. Toward the end of one performance, he squeezed the juice from a lemon between his hands. He said to the onlookers, "I will offer \$200 to anyone here who can squeeze another drop from this lemon."

A thin older lady slowly made her way up to the stage. She picked up the lemon and clamped it between her two frail, bony hands. She squeezed. And out came a teaspoon of lemon juice. The strongman was amazed. He paid the woman \$200 but privately asked her, "What is the secret of your strength?" "Practice," the woman answered. "I have been treasurer of my church for forty-two years!"

So here we are, our first Sunday in pledge season. I'll admit it's a bit different than pledge season at college fraternities and sororities, so I figured it might make sense to talk first about just what is a pledge?

Technically, logistically, it's very straightforward. A simple promise, really. It says, I think over the next year I can invest a certain amount in the ministries of First Church. Here's what I think I can contribute as a part of the family of this congregation.

Pledging is our tradition, as Christians and as Presbyterians. It's a practice of supporting God's people, of planning for the care of God's people, that goes way back to biblical times, both in the Old Testament and then in the New Testament community of early Christians. Yes, pledging is our tradition, our practice, our way of life. It's kind of interesting to note that, even as we are grateful for all that is given, for every contribution, less than 1% of our total income, our total resources here at First Church, comes from weekly non-pledge contributions.

There's a lot to say theologically about pledging too. Pledging is a commitment to a practice of gratitude for the blessings in this life that God has given us. Pledging is a commitment in advance to place our priorities where our hearts lie. Pledging is a commitment to be a responsible part of a community, this community, this family, that is our congregation.

Pledging is not just about money. At its core, pledging is about action. It's about putting our money where our mouth is, stepping up to the plate, quite literally. Yes, pledging is about doing something, about action.

And with all the unknowns of this turbulent world, especially in these turbulent times, pledging also is an act of faith.

You know, as the singer Madonna has made very clear, we are living in a material world. And while we may not all be material girls, we do live in a world where accumulating money, where buying and selling is at the center of our economy. And the temptation in our world is to make money the center of our life's focus. The temptation is powerful, even despite our gospel message that possessions do not lead to salvation.

Christians are not called to escape whatever forms of capitalism they find themselves living in. Rather, Christians are called to discern what our relationship to God calls us to do, to wrestle with what really matters in their context, in the economic system we find ourselves. Jesus never said that material things have no value, just that material things do not have *ultimate* value. And that human value is not based on material accumulation.

So instead of focusing on money as our ultimate goal, our faith leads us to the concept of stewardship. Starting with God's creation of the earth and the role of humans as stewards of creation, moving to Jesus' messages of stewardship for each other. Using our time and our talents and our resources to make the world a better place in God's vision, in God's name. Our relationship to money, how we think of what we have or what we don't have, what we do with our time, our talent, our resources, is actually at the core of what we are called to do as Christians. And that's why giving is an act of faith, in this stewardship season and always. Pledging is an act of faith.

Three things I wanted to talk about today, three reasons why pledging is so important.

First, pledging empowers identity. We already mentioned last year's theme of treasure, and how in many ways our identity follows where we put our treasure. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." But pledging goes further, pledging empowers identity. It says, "I am part of something larger than myself." It says, "I stand with a family of believers, all sharing a vision to love God and love people following in the example of Jesus." It says, "I believe in what we're doing here as a church, and who we are together." It says, no it screams out, "Yes! I'm in! I'm all in! *This* is who I am!" Pledging empowers identity.

Second, pledging empowers accountability. We believe that we can do better when we "do" together. We believe that decisions we make together with the grace of God and the power of the spirit, in the give and take of our dynamic community, help us individually to stay on track, to better live into our fullest and best identity as Christians. Even with our best intentions, even on our best days, sometimes even our deepest convictions can be neglected or overlooked. Pledging empowers personal accountability to live into our values, to put our money where our hearts lie, to allow the church to encourage us in pursuit of our own generosity goals. When you pledge, you empower the church to empower you.

And finally, pledging empowers our church ministry. If we don't know how much we can plan on having available in the year ahead, we can't plan together, in fact we can't plan at all, about what our ministry here at First Church will be. To imagine our ministry together, we pray, we dialogue together, we try to discern what God would have us do in this world. But without knowing we have the resources for ministry, our first answer to ministry has to be, at best, "yes, but." Yes, but we don't have the money. At worst, our answer has to be a "no." No, we don't know we will have the money for that. Pledging lets us

live into our abundance. Pledging empowers our work together by letting us plan, letting us know what we've got in the way of resources for our work together as Christ's body, making the world a better place in the name of Jesus Christ.

Pledging empowers identity.

Pledging empowers accountability.

Pledging empowers ministry.

So what does all this mean, specifically. I think maybe it's all quite simple, really. Our standard of giving should reflect our standard of living.

Tithing has been a traditional biblical measure – that's 10% of what we earn. And some churches demand that of their members. Our knee-jerk reaction in our sophisticated New York perspective, may be against that kind of control, it seems so arbitrary, maybe even forced. But there may be something insightful here.

Many people of means in our modern world give to a variety of worthwhile causes, organizations that fit within our vision of what our faith requires. Some allocate a percentage, even maybe that 10% tithe, to the totality of their giving, and that's of course fine. But whatever our giving to whatever worthwhile causes we love, shouldn't church be one of our greatest priorities in our personal giving? Maybe putting church in the top three (if not the top slot) shows that where our treasure is, so will our heart be also.

You've of course heard of the "giving pledge" that many wealthy CEOs have signed onto, and it's much the same idea as what we're talking about now. These leaders go against the grain of just accumulating as much as possible for their personal gain, and instead pledge to give away 50% of their income each year, and 50% their total wealth. Now don't get lost in the train of thought that they've got so much, that it's easy for them to do, that it's easy for them, with so much money, to make that commitment. Maybe so. But the principle is the same as we each think through how important our generosity should be in our lives and in our own personal decisions.

Let's talk some examples here. The math is easy if you like to think about proportional giving. Just to take a round number, at an annual income of \$50,000: If we did the 10% tithe, that's less than \$100 a week. At 5%, that's less than \$50 a week. And if we think about giving just the first hour of our compensation, one hour of pay out of a 40-hour workweek, that's 2-1/2 percent. That's \$25 a week for someone making \$50,000. That's less than we spend on our weekly Starbucks.

At least it's worth taking a couple of minutes to think about what that might mean for you, what that might mean for your church family.

So many of us are part of what's being called the "gig" economy, even more so during this pandemic. It's where we don't have an annual salary, more like pay-for-work, freelancers compensated for the task, like many artists or writers or even providers of service, agents, and even those whose year-end bonus is a large part of our annual income and is dependent on the final outcome at year-end. But pledging works for us too in the gig economy, by thinking of what a minimum pledge might be, then sending in more when we know more is available. Remember, you're not pledging in blood, and the church approaches pledges pastorally. If circumstances change and you just can't fulfill your pledge, all you need do is talk any of us, your pastors. We can't let our uncertainty prevent us from pledging.

You know, we actually pledge all the time without knowing it. Theater and performance groups have season subscriptions that allow the arts community to survive. Clubs and museums have annual dues if you want to be a member. We all know about pledge week for PBS and NPR, so we know it's important,

even as we roll our eyes at the interruption of our favorite television and radio programming. Pretty much anytime we want to be a part of an organization, we're actually pledging without really necessarily knowing it.

It's not just big amounts either. In our congregation, we do have some large pledges of course, as people are able, and we couldn't survive without them. But there are so many more people who pledge in line with their more modest wealth and income. We need all pledges, large ones and modest ones, both the treasures of a kingdom and the widow's mite. Yes, even the small mustard seed that grows, that spreads, into the nourishing tree.

All that is why we are asking you, we are calling on you and your family to discuss your commitment to your faith, to prayerfully discern what God is calling you to do, to make your pledge today and in the days ahead. Pledges can be made on the church website or through the link in the First Matters weekly newsletter. The elders on the Session, the Trustees, the Deacons, and even your pastors, we are quickly approaching 100% participation. We're just today publicly launching our annual stewardship drive, and we're at about a third of our way to our 2021 ministry budget goal. I guess that can either be viewed as a nice start, or a long way still to go. In either case, your decision to pledge will make all the difference.

I'll leave you today with another funny story about stewardship. Two men were marooned on an Island. One man paced back and forth worried and scared, while the other man sat back and was sunning himself, calm and relaxed. The first anxious man said to the second man, "Aren't you afraid no one will find us, aren't you afraid we are going to die?" "No," said the second man, "I make half a million dollars a year, and I tithe faithfully to my church every single week. It's stewardship month at my church. My pastor will find me."

So we invite you to be a part of the wonderful story that is First Church, the powerful ministry and beacon of light that is *your* congregation. Be part of the generous love of our Lord, as we all – each of us, together – as we each take our leap of faith in answering God's call, making the world a better place in the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen.