

1 Chronicles 29: 10-18
2 Corinthians 9: 6-12
Luke 6: 37-38

A Good Measure
November 15, 2015
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The First Congregational Church, UCC of Somerville, MA is a progressive, edgy, crazy kind of church. It's fun to read about some of the things they do. Every year they do a stewardship campaign – just as we do. This year their theme was the Cheerful Giving passage from 2 Corinthians, which you heard read by Peter a little while ago. In the case of the Somerville church, they augmented their theme with neuroscience and the research from positive psychology that has proven that giving money away makes us happier than keeping it for ourselves. This is how it played out for them:

On Stewardship Sunday, the pastor handed out \$500 in varying denominations, in a sealed envelope along with a pledge card. Some cards had \$1, some \$2, \$5, \$10, \$20, and one lucky person got \$50. She charged people to take their “happiness pulse” just before giving it away, then give it to someone who needed it (preferably someone they didn't know), then take their “happiness pulse” again—and then write in to the church community listserv (yes, their church has its own list serv) to share how things worked out for them.

This is one of the notes, from a parishioner telling us of the spiritual alchemy of giving it away.

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“Now is the time when we bring our own stories before the Church List serve.

When Molly mentioned in church last week that she had dug into her own coffers and put undisclosed amounts of money into envelopes for each of us- I was intrigued.

That the amounts in each envelope varied piqued my interest even more. With our new financial gift we were encouraged to go out into the world and give it. And not just give it blindly, but to give and assess ourselves before and after the act of giving- to quantify the effect it had on us.

The charge sent me out into the world with new eyes and a keener perspective.

I saw need everywhere. Davis Square was full of viable candidates to receive what I had been given. From God's children struggling with homelessness to vibrant street performers whose baskets were sadly empty.

My envelope had not one but two dollars. I kept them tucked safe inside my purse for days mulling over the right way to share them. Should I give \$1 to two different people? Or double down and put it all on one person- how best to optimize? This caused a modicum of stress, the urge to get it right. To give perfectly.

In the end, I spent the \$2 on a coffee for myself at Diesel. (I am assuming that Diesel is a neighborhood coffee shop.)

*Truth be told, I spent the \$2 on a **portion** of a coffee at Diesel. It is well known that there is almost nothing one can buy at Diesel for \$2 even. I was at the counter, having already ordered with no cash to my name...I caved. It was a moment of pure desperation, one about which I am not proud. I also engaged in the required emotional assessment. I noted that though I felt better after getting my morning caffeine injection, I felt notably worse about having failed in my charge.*

Shrouded in my shame, I headed to the subway.

I stuffed my hand in my pocket rummaging for my subway pass.

And found... \$7 ! A five and two ones crumpled into ball the size of a Chiclet by the washing machine.

Hallelujah! God has given me another chance at bat! I wouldn't let Her down again!

I gave the \$5 to the gentleman who sells the Spare Change Newspaper in the Davis T and always reminds us "Have a wonderful day and don't work too hard."

I gave \$2 to the man who plays guitar between the platforms and whose version of the Piano Man is so soulful it hurts.

Between Davis and Central I saw a dozen more windows of opportunity to give and be generous. Our city is swollen with need. The financial material for this experiment was gone, but the internal drive was still there to give, to contribute even in my small way. Maybe I couldn't give perfectly but I could give consistently and whole-heartedly.

I am going to dig a bit deeper into my pockets and into the couch cushions; looking for crumpled bills and forgotten coins. I'm going to increase my monthly giving to the church by 30% to try to meet the needs of our city in whatever small way I am able.

With \$2 Molly bought me a new pair of lenses with which to see the world.

More clearly, with more urgency and empathy.

High Fives and Lots of Love,

*Erin**

Now, I am not going to suggest that whenever you give money away, more will magically appear in your pocket to replace it. But I do suggest that we take note of the joy expressed by that giver. How do we measure joy? How do we measure success? How do we measure enough, or super-abundance, or scarcity? How do we spend or conserve our resources- financial, spiritual, emotional, etc. - so that we are effective in the world? In other words, what kinds of stewards are we?

And, I don't want to start with the checks that go in the collection plate, or the \$2 cup of coffee or the miraculous gift of change buried in the sofa. I want to start with what we are really about here. Of what are we stewards, here at the Norwich Congregational Church, United Church of Christ? When I turned for insights to the UCC denominational web site, here are some possibilities I found, some categories. We could be:

Stewards of the Gospel

Stewards of God's Extravagant Welcome

Stewards of Peace and Justice

Stewards of Responsible Freedom

Stewards of Abundant Life and Transformative Generosity

I would like to point out the thread of transformative generosity that winds its way through the Scriptures. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann points out that the Bible starts out with a liturgy of abundance – a song of praise for God's generosity. The first creation story in Genesis chapter one keeps saying, "It is good, it is good, it is good, it is very good." When King David conceived the idea of building a Temple in Jerusalem, he asked the households of Israel to contribute. In a prayer of thanksgiving for their generosity, he says, "O Lord our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a house for your holy name comes from your hand and is all your own." Generosity was the prayerful, transformative recognition of abundance. Filled with God's generosity, Jesus went around to people suffering from scarcity – scarcity of health, of acceptance, of power, of understanding – and replaced it with a gift of abundance. Jesus was steeped in the transformative generosity of God and in the conviction that if you share your

bread with your neighbor, the world will be made new. He knows that generosity isn't something you just think about or pray about: it's something you do. And the apostle Paul, in taking up a collection from Greek churches for the support of the beleaguered church in Jerusalem, uses that same kind of language: "You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity."

Stewardship presumes some kind of blessing and abundance. Jesus sums up the purpose of his ministry this way: "I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly." Our job is discernment of the ways in which all of us, including this church, already have been blessed with spiritual blessings. Then the real work of stewardship becomes embracing generosity in the spirit of Jesus as a way of life. How have those categories - the Gospel or God's Extravagant Welcome or the work of Peace and Justice or exercising your Responsible Freedom or a sense of the Abundant Life - how have they been transformative for you?

In the prayer of confession we prayed earlier, one of the phrases includes "I admit to my need for transformation." I come back to the measurement question. Can we measure transformation? The First Church of Somerville, a little facetiously perhaps, asked its members to use neuroscience and the research from positive psychology and take their "happiness pulse." We need to pay attention to the prayer and learning and actions that produce, if not happiness, then at least Erin's kind of transformation: "new pair of lenses with which to see the world. More clearly, with more urgency and empathy."

This is a great communal endeavor. We learn from our traditions - from stories about David and Jesus and Paul - from our cherished elders, from our children. We hear about their transformations, which cannot be truly measured, but only celebrated. We share the stories and the need and the yearning, because abundance has already been given, and in our future is "a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over...put into our laps; for the measure we give will be the measure we get back."

I close with the end of a poem by George Eliot, *The Choir Invisible*:

May I reach
That purest heaven, -- be to other souls
The cup of strength in some great agony,
Enkindle generous ardor, feed pure love,
Beget the smiles that have no cruelty,
Be the sweet presence of a good diffused,
And in diffusion ever more intense!
So shall I join the choir invisible
Whose music is the gladness of the world.
Amen.

* story found at <http://realgoodchurch.com/post/132868223274/give-it-away>