

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
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## **“Not . . . Like the Rest”**

**A sermon by Sam R. Miglarese**

**30<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)  
Reformation Sunday / Stewardship Sunday  
October 27, 2013**

**Joel 2:23–32; 2 Timothy 4:6–8, 16–18; Luke 18:9–14**

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This past week, my dear mother-in-law asked me when I was going to preach again so that she could bring a friend. I said to her that as a matter of fact, I was preaching this Sunday, Stewardship Sunday. She responded by saying, “Well... maybe another time.”

The unspoken message to that response was, “Why should I go to your church to hear about stewardship when I can go to my own and hear the same message?” But it’s true, isn’t it? Whenever the words, “stewardship,” “stewardship season,” “Stewardship Sunday” are spoken as it is on this Reformation Sunday—it’s true that so often, people do not see stewardship as a core value of our community rooted in the Scriptures. It is viewed through the lens of fundraising. All of us are invited to support our universities, non-profits, our political causes—we are always being asked or are asking others to support worthy causes because without charitable dollars, these causes would not survive for the betterment for the world in which we live.

But the message of stewardship within the church communion is very different because we need to take advantage of the opportunity each stewardship season to link our giving with the deeper values of our spiritual lives, our spiritual growth, our spiritual enrichment and development. One of the dangers in annual

stewardship campaigns is that they become so routine that we miss the opportunity presented. Stewardship is a way of thanking God for all the blessings by returning a portion of time, talent and treasure. Those spiritual connections bring authentic meaning to our gifts. We gather today to celebrate the gift of giving as we have been gifted ourselves by God's overwhelming grace.

We listened to Jesus tell a story. It is not directly related to stewardship, but indirectly, it is. It is a story about prayer. Last Sunday we heard him speak about the widow and the unjust judge, as Jesus was trying to use that experience of her persistence and her insistence to get a fair ruling from the judge, who himself didn't care. Jesus used that example to teach us something about the way we need to persist and insist in our prayer life.

He moves directly into another story and says, "I'm going to tell you this parable about those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt" (Lk. 18:9). Right away, when you see the Pharisee versus the Publican tax collector, you see good guys and bad guys. That's not the point Jesus was trying to make. In this particular example, the Pharisee was the devout one. In his prayer, he listed the ways in which he was grateful to God for not only the kind of people that he wasn't, but also for his close attention ritual practice. He said, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people..." He listed three groups: thieves, rogues, and adulterers. (I really feel for him because I don't want to be like those people either—thieves, rogues, and adulterers—so I can give him a break on that.) Then he turns and says, "... or even like this tax collector," almost pointing him out in the back of the temple, "that despicable one." Tax collectors, as you know, were cooperators and collaborators with the Roman occupation. They exploited and extorted money from their own people. They were traitors. And yet, that's the one in the back of the temple who prayed, "O Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." It is when the Pharisee judgmentally and self-righteously compares himself with the tax collector that I realized the lack of his authenticity in regard to his devotionals.

Some people go through life looking to the right and looking to the left, constantly comparing themselves. This is commonly called "Keeping up with the Joneses."

When you go through life checking out your own self-worth by how other people view your worthiness, you lose authenticity. You lose the deeper meaning of what you do and what you don't do. I believe that is the message we can take away from the Gospel parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector because our generosity is not based on externals, it is all about heart. It is all about the disposition, the interior disposition, that is the basis for any kind of gift-giving and thanksgiving that we offer.

We celebrate Dedication Sunday after a series of weeks hearing wonderful testimonies about the way in which generosity is a way of life, about the way generosity has really changed peoples' lives and changed our lives. When we get in touch and embrace those truths with the right disposition, with the right attitude of mind and heart, we will become committed disciples of the Lord Jesus, the kind of commitment that ultimately is rooted in the heart and not in dutifulness. The Pharisee was dutiful. He fasted, tithed, was grateful for not being like the rest, and he stood off by himself making those kinds of prayers. But Jesus says it was the publican, the tax collector who went home justified because he didn't exalt himself. He recognized his own need for God's mercy. In that sense of gratitude for the mercy of God, he went home justified, and then Jesus said, as he said at the beginning of the story, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." It's not the externals but what comes deeply rooted in the heart. I think that is the meaning of our Dedication today.

When we come forward with our pledge cards, our offerings, the Hunger for Change, I hope you come reminded of the inner disposition that undergirds the meaning of your act. It has always been for me, over the years that I've been here, such a powerful moment for us to come forward, in whatever financial position we are, to put on the pillar or on the table of the Lord, in the basket, something that is sacrificial. I hope that you can do it today as well. Sacrificial giving is a way we seek to exercise the kind of stewardship described in the Scriptures, where Jesus praises those who use their gifts wisely for the benefit of others.

There are so many ways in which we can come forward that really don't match the values that Jesus is trying to teach us in the Gospel. We can come begrudgingly. I

remember so often in my ministry people say, “All the church wants from you is your money!” Have you heard that before? “All they want from you is your money.” Yes, the Church needs your support to maintain personnel, programs, and property, but the Gospels ask of us to give beyond our duty to give. I encourage you to come forward out of a sense of gratitude for all the blessings that God has bestowed upon you, even in the deepest suffering and griefs of our lives, intense though they may be. I’ll never forget Leigh Knauert’s letter to us after the death of her husband, when she quoted Thornton Wilder saying precisely that: “It’s in the most intense grief that I recognize the power of gratitude.”

We also don’t want to come with a sense of self congratulation: “Look at me, how much I’m able to give!” as was the case in the story of the Pharisee. We don’t want to come giving out of guilt or out of a sense of being coerced or quid pro quo: “You do something for me, and I’ll do something for you.” Whatever comes forth from our gifts, the goal ultimately, spiritually, is to connect it to our embrace of God’s generosity to us, and out of gratitude for that, giving deeply and profoundly what we have. You heard the phrase, “It’s not the amount that counts”—the amount does matter, obviously—but ultimately, “it’s the spirit behind the gift that makes all the difference.” We need to give for the right reasons. We need to give as committed disciples, as Christians who are giving out of gratitude, out of our blessing, because much more than money or time or talent, God wants our hearts: hearts that are full of faith and trust in Him.

What is important for us today is the attitude with which we give, the love that motivates the spirit of sacrifice, that sense of responsibility, a sense of gratitude that permeates our lives through each and every day. God never fails to bless a truly generous gift, a sacrificial gift, because in our living out a life of faith and trust, we recognize the powerful gift of God’s mercy and generosity. Amen.