

I GIVE THANKS
Stewardship Sermon for 10-10-10
Scripture is Luke 17:11-19

Can you imagine that next month I'll begin my eighth year as your pastor at Deering Community Church? That means I have preached a lot of stewardship sermons to you. At first I wondered how I would be able to put Ruthie's baptism and the start of the stewardship season together. The lectionary came to my rescue with the story of The Ten Lepers. As I read about the thankfulness of the tenth leper, I knew my topic would be about how thankful I am for my years here with you. Also baptisms are always a time for great thanksgiving. Today was very special because I have known Ruthie the whole time I have been here. It's been lovely seeing her grow from a preschooler to a pre teen. Actually I am also very thankful to be able to share with you once again about stewardship.

There was a very clever pastor who had a unique approach to stewardship sermons so I thought maybe I could learn from him to make this stewardship season especially successful. Listen to what he said: "Brothers and sisters, I have before me this morning THREE sermons: a one thousand dollars sermon that lasts five minutes, a five hundred dollars sermon that lasts one hour, and a two hundred dollars sermon that lasts two hours. We shall now take up the offering, and the amount received will determine the sermon preached!" As you can imagine, the \$1000 needed were offered up that day.

It's not unusual this time of year for the Trustees and the Council to start worrying a bit about how they are going to put together a balanced budget for the next year. I am a believer in a "faith based" budget and recently told the council that even though we may not be able to balance the budget by ourselves, I do believe that there is a Divine Power that is available to help. Last Sunday we talked about faith as small as a mustard seed that could do great things because God works through our faith. This year as well as most stewardship seasons is a time to test this faith.

I want to tell you a story about another church in a small town that was having a hard time financially. The church treasurer had resigned. The accounts were a mess, and nobody wanted to take on the job. The church trustees, at their wits' end, convinced the local Chinese grocery owner to supervise the finances.

The shop-keeper seldom came to church, but he agreed to pull the church out of the red -- providing that the Trustees and Council would not ask him for a report until the next Annual Meeting. So at the next Annual Meeting the shopkeeper presented his report. All along the Pastor had been paid as well as the utilities. A \$5,000 loan on the church had also been paid; the church had donated \$2,000 to missions, and there was a \$1,253 credit balance at the bank, with no outstanding debts.

The congregation sat in stunned silence. At last someone staggered to his feet and said, "How did you DO it?"

Quietly the shop-keeper explained: "You all buy groceries at my store, yes? And you all want credit, yes? And I GIVE you credit, yes? And I give you my bill at month's end, yes? And you can't read my writing, yes? And you don't know that I add 10% to your bill, yes? And you haven't missed paying my bills, yes? Well, now all of you have been TITHING for a whole YEAR! Praise God, yes?!"

Well that was an interesting way to get people tithing! Enough funny stories for now; let's take a look at our Gospel lesson. In the Gospel, Jesus is met by 10 lepers, who called out to him to have mercy upon them, as there was little or no hope for lepers, for the unclean, in those days. They were following the Law by keeping their distance and Jesus did not touch them; however, he tells them to "Go, and show your selves to the Priests", this was the rule for lepers who wanted permission to rejoin the community. As they journeyed on they could see that they were being cured, that their skin was clearing up—they would no longer be outcasts. What a wonderful thing! It doesn't say, but I can imagine that they took off in a hurry. They had been separated from their family and friends due to the leprosy quarantine and now they must have been excited to go back to the farm or the fishing boat, or the shop—to see the places and the people that they had been kept away from. One of these men, when he noticed his cure, was so thankful that he stopped in his tracks and turned back. Instead of going on to the priest, he turned around and praised God in a loud voice, threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. We are told that this man was a Samaritan, a foreigner—(read

“unclean”, Muslim, heretic; not a Judean, (read: clean? holy? Christian?) Jesus addressed the one who returned and says, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.” The word for being made well is the same as the word for being saved. The others had been cured but this man who returned had been made whole.

I am so thankful for knowing Jesus! I want to yell it from the streets just like the leper did. I’d love to be able to fall down at the feet of Jesus and tell him how much I love him and how thankful I am for his love. I am so thankful that from childhood I have had access to his teachings. Like Timothy in our Epistle reading last week, I had a Christian mother and grandmother who shared the faith with me. I had that “being born again” by mistake experience when I was around 10 years old, not quite as old as Ruthie. Most of you remember my telling you that I went to a religious revival that had a call at the end to all those that loved Jesus to stand up with their eyes closed. I was led to a back room and told that I was saved and how proud I should be of myself to have made that decision (by mistake or was it?). I was given a small Gospel of John and read it from cover to cover and then started in on the whole Bible. At that young age, I felt Jesus calling to me to love and care for all God’s children and started out on a road to work for justice, especially in race relations. Yes, I give thanks for these experiences in my life! Don’t worry, I’m not going to go through every significant spiritual and religious experience in the last 60 years.

Without mentioning names, as I know I would forget some important people, I want to tell you how thankful I am for the people of this church community. I have been welcomed so warmly. You have supported me, even if my theology is a little on the liberal side for some of you. You have let me love you, even when all my hugs and blessings may have seemed a bit foreign to some of you in the beginning. And you have loved me back!! Big time! You have worked hard to live out Jesus' teachings. You have been prudent and generous with your finances. I give thanks for the ways you have helped others in our church and larger community. I see you reaching out to others in prayer, with financial contributions, and with your presence. One of the things I will be eternally thankful for is my Sabbatical trip to India. Your help and skills from the very beginning, made it possible to get a Lilly Grant that allowed me and my family to have a once in a lifetime experience. I did not have to worry about what was happening here at the church while I was gone as there were so many of you providing leadership and support and caring for each other. What a gift that was to me! When I had my long medical situation earlier this year, again you all gathered together and not only took good care of the church and also excellent care of me and Neill. Thank you, thank you. Besides that being a gift to me, I hope it was a gift to you in realizing how competent and strong you are as the body of Christ. Yes, I could go on much longer but I think you get the drift of how special you are to me. I thank God for bringing us together.

Stewardship is all about blessings and abundance. It is about our recognizing all that we have right now and our desire to share that abundance. Living thanks is more important than giving thanks. That's where the doing comes in. You show your praise and thanks when you visit the sick; spend hours of planning and rehearsal time to provide beautiful music for our souls; put on a BBQ at West Deering with no strings attached; attend chapel with the women in the Goffstown prison; take care of our church building and grounds; figure out budgets and pay bills; plan stewardship campaigns; teach our children in Sunday School; enjoy each other at potlucks. Stewardship is about recognizing all that we already have; it's about seeing the abundance in our lives and sharing our gifts with others.

Of course we need money! Our pledge goal for next year's budget is \$63,000. That's about what we will bring in this year, although it is not enough to pay all the bills. You are already so generous and yet I need to ask you if you can, to possibly give a little more. If you could increase your pledge \$1 a week or maybe \$10 a month that would really help. Some of you may need to decrease your pledges for the coming year as I know these economic times are not good for many of you. There's no shame in changing your pledge because of changed circumstances in your financial life. I'm confident that you will all do the best that you can.

Today I ask you to celebrate with me the one leper that came back to praise God and return thanks for his new life. Please join with me in praising God and giving thanks for each other and this church. I truly do give thanks

for the faithfulness of this congregation. I look forward to another year of our growing together in praise, gratitude, and generosity; in seeing and doing so that we may bring about God's kingdom here in Deering, NH. Praise and thanks be to God. Amen