

Rooted in Love

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship on Stewardship Sunday
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC

November 14, 2021

Text: Romans 12:1-5

Good morning and welcome to our Stewardship Sunday here at UCC Westerly! “Stewardship” is one of those words we toss around in church assuming folks know what it is and why it matters when often people only have a vague idea of what it means. Stewardship is primarily a church word describing how a church’s members and friends support the church both personally and financially. Or, put another way, it is how each of us here, personally and virtually, support our beloved church with our time, talent and treasure. Time of course refers to the actual amount of time you invest in the church, in a variety of ways like attending worship or helping with events like the Bazaar or serving on boards and committees. I like to think of this aspect of stewardship as grounded in the old adage that no one can, *or should*, do everything but everyone can do something, small though it might seem.

Talent is the time one invests in the church putting to use for God whatever your abilities, or expertise or interest might be. This one is easy to overlook because it often manifests as us doing things we already enjoy, only doing them specifically for the church. For example, Deb and Lynn have a unique talent for creating those incredible gift baskets. Dwayne and Kevin share their artistic gifts through the wreaths and trees they make for the bazaar. All of our many talented bakers and makers of jams and jellies and relishes – like Sandi and Carolyn and Shirin and Claire and Sally Shaw, just to name a few – they share with the church their gift for making all these yummy things which sell so well. And we have so

many, many more folks sharing their gifts and talents all year long, and yet we take all those skills, all that energy spent and talent invested for granted because it is so often invisible in our life as a faith community together.

Then of course there's the treasure aspect of stewardship which is, quite candidly, the easiest one since it involves the investment of money in the church. This investment happens through weekly offerings including pledges, the amount we plan or hope to give to the church annually, as well as what is called "loose plate" offerings. Like the name implies, these are monies we receive in the offering plate on Sundays, usually from folks who do not pledge. But not always. Sometimes even people who do pledge also gift a little loose plate to the church on an occasional Sunday as a way of inviting God and their church family into the celebration when something good happens in their lives. But treasure also refers as well to time and talent in the sense that our finances are overseen by a very devoted group of financial volunteers who carry willingly the responsibility of managing the financial needs of the church. This includes folks like Jenny Brummund, our financial secretary, and her assistants Ed Stratton, Bill Street and Michele Mitchell. They diligently count the money from each weekly offering on Sunday as well as the ongoing funds we receive from various sources by mail. I am so grateful for their willingness to perform their tasks so diligently and faithfully, Sunday after Sunday all year round. They make deposits, keep the tally sheets in balance and then, the last step, recording all the individual contributions into our church accounting software so they are able to provide those giving statements to all who support the church financially. And currently they are also diligently counting the weekly bazaar proceeds. No easy task I assure you!

And we can't leave our Treasurer and Assistant Treasurer out of this conversation! I honestly do not know where we would be without George Gray and Kevin Dows. They spend hours on everything from managing payroll and the accompanying taxes to paying bills, dealing with the banks and all the church's various accounts, including managing the endowment funds. George meets regularly with our financial consultants to make sure we are handling the church's funds in the best, most efficient way possible. Kevin has been instrumental in seeing that all these functions moved from a manual system to a computerized one, no easy task! And yet here we are, one of the best financially managed churches I have had the privilege of serving. Dear ones, that does not just happen. Our financial folks, this team of six talented and dedicated people is one big reason why we are able to function as we do. And, most critically, when you give money to our church you can be confident it will be used for the purpose for which you gave it. Our financial team sees to it that this happens, all the time. It is thanks to them that we are one of those rarest of institutions these days – a financially solvent and secure church. Don't get me wrong, we do not have money to spare – but we have enough. And that is so much more than many of our sister churches can say 20 months into the Covid reality.

Let me pause here and make clear that all of our board and committee members play key roles in the daily functioning of our church and one of these Sundays we will look at all this in more detail. But our focus today is stewardship and that, at its core, is about how healthy and secure we are as a church. This becomes visible clearly during stewardship season and especially so this year with our theme for this year – “Rooted in Love.” When our Stewardship Team gathered in early September to figure out this year's Stewardship Campaign, the

first decision these folks made was that we needed to keep things simple this year when so many other things have been more complicated than ever before. That's why, of the three possible campaign approaches we considered, we quickly settled on this one with its emphasis on love. Frankly, this was an easy decision because as the team talked about what comes to mind first when we think about our church, it is love. We love each other in a way many churches try to but never quite achieve. We are there for each other for joyous occasions and sad ones, when things are going well and when they aren't. We understand that the church is first and foremost a community of people seeking a common understanding and experience of what it means to be in relationship with God. I have never seen a group of people before who so intuitively understand that with the community we seek to create as God's Beloved here, comes responsibility. This is visible in our Order for Receiving New Members when we greet them with the traditional words, "you are no longer strangers and sojourners but you are equally citizens with the saints and members of this household of God." And we mean it. You are one of us in that moment. You are loved then, and way before that moment as well.

That's why this year's Stewardship text taken from Psalm 1 is so very helpful in understanding our rooted in love theme and how it is such an accurate reflection of our church. Psalm 1 is actually called a "torah" psalm because it serves a literary function as an introduction to all the themes to follow throughout the remainder of the 150 psalms. It is also an instructional psalm in that it sets out clearly the two ways forth in life for humans. Those two paths through life come down to two choices, the psalms say, over and over again. There is the path of life that leads to blessing and goodness. Then there is the

path of life which leads to wickedness and evil. The path to a life of blessings from God is quite literally the path to life rooted always in God's love. The other path, the one described in this psalm as "the path the scoffers tread," leads only to death. This is why verse 1 of Psalm 1 begins: "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers." Interesting that this begins with a negative – telling you happiness comes from NOT doing something. It is an attention getter for sure! But it continues: "Happy are [those whose] delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night."

This sounds lovely and poetic, doesn't it, conjuring up images of folks just sitting around idyllic locales, eyes closed and breathing deeply, just thinking about how wonderful God is. And because it sounds so poetic it also sounds completely unreal and totally impractical, disconnected from the real life we struggle to negotiate each day. But, that is not what this text means. God does not delight in people sitting around just thinking about God and God's teachings all day. God expects concrete action from God's beloved people, visible in this very phrase when we realize that "meditate" in the sense of the Hebrew Scriptures is more accurately understood as "recite." What's the difference between meditate and recite? A big one when we recall that in the time the Psalms were written, thousands of years ago, very few people were literate. Therefore, they could not have read the psalms – this or any other one – on their own. They would only know them from attending worship with the priests – first in the Tent of the Presence before the great Temple was built, and then in the Temple itself. This is where they would have learned the Psalms, by singing and reciting them, day after day, week after week, from when they were little to when they were

approaching the end of life. Reciting, not meditating. Dear ones, we know from our own grammar school days, that in order to recite something, you have to have memorize it. As we used to say, you have to “know it by heart.” You have to know it by heart. You have to know it to the core of who you are, carrying it with you in your very being as life unfolds each day. And the same is still true for us today when we want to be truly rooted in God. Each of us must take on the challenge of investing the time to study and understand the Bible, incorporating favorite palms and stories into our hearts. To do that you have to spend time getting to know who God is and who you are in relationship with God.

You have to know what is to open yourself up to being transformed by God in the way you live your life each day. You have to pray, talk with God, here at church and at home every day. Say grace. Repeat the Lord’s prayer while you have your morning coffee. Thank Jesus for green lights when you need them. And you have to get to know who God is, who Jesus is, who the Holy Spirit is to you and that happens by learning about the bible. We do that in worship every Sunday and after the holidays I’ll be making yet another attempt at a weekly Bible study. Carve out the time to participate – it will be in person and virtual – or at least make your own way through the study materials. Dear ones, never forget that it is an *intentional* relationship with God, developed through the investment of your own time, talent and treasure, that makes living a life rooted in God’s love real and deep. And that love transforms everything it touches.

So, dear ones, on this Stewardship Sunday when we celebrate this church and all the people who have invested in her so deeply over the years, we can say with confidence and assurance that we are rooted in love and we intend to stay that way. We know we are blessed by our connection to this church and each

other. We take joy in being God's people in this place, in this time, doing what we do the best we can, always with God's help. We are grateful to have slipped away from the path that scoffers tread. We know that we are "like trees planted by streams of water ... [yielding our] fruit in season." We know that though our church is small, we are not withering because we are alive with God's love, alive in God's Spirit, alive in the fellowship Jesus brings to every gathering. We know we are God's people, ready to face the future – whatever it may be – together, knowing that it will always be God's future to which we are called. My final question for you today, then, is – who will you invite to come join us? That invitation is always yours to offer. Amen.