

“What Shall I Return to the Lord?”

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
November 13, 2022 – Morning Worship on Stewardship Sunday
Text: Psalm 116:5-14

Just yesterday I witnessed the annual miracle created by this church. Many of you were here working on the annual rebirth of this miracle too, but I am guessing maybe you were not totally aware it was a miracle. It surely was. Of course, I am talking about the Christmas Bazaar, now reborn in pop-up style thanks to Covid. I think of it as a pop-up simply because we do this not once, not twice, but three times. That is miracle #1. So many of the folks I spoke with yesterday were totally shocked we were doing this two more times, adding fresh merchandise each week. I mean, seriously, that’s crazy by church standards everywhere. Yet, here we are – one week down and two more to go. Miracle #1, for sure.

Miracle #2 is each and every one of you. I venture to say it would be downright scary to total up the number of hours involved in preparing every detail of the Bazaar writ large, over all three weeks. It’s probably why no one has ever seriously proposed doing such a thing, myself included. But I do urge you to think about it. Think about all the hours the baskets take from concept to finished product. Think about all the time and ingredients and shopping for same, not to mention the expertise, all the baked goods take. Stop to consider all the creativity, the innate ability to know just how to create these beautiful works of art in the form of wreaths and little trees take, not to mention those bows! And, holy cow, the Nostalgia Boutique! So many tiny details and little items the average person would just overlook and yet it is truly a shopping experience that draws so many to the Bazaar in the first place. Sally Shaw’s purses were a fun addition this year too, as were Martha Evan’s beautiful and unique note cards. I know how much patience the jewelry takes to get it set out and beautifully

displayed! The Bid to Beat Baskets represent hours of work and thoughtful coordination of gift cards with unique gift items. And the Silent Auction, especially lovely this year with so many unique items. All of this together is why I know our annual Christmas Bazaar is a miracle which only happens because of the gifts and talents so many of you share so willingly with the church.

I am keenly aware of the miracle that is the UCC Westerly Pop-up Christmas Bazaars because my role is primarily just to talk with people, answer questions and listen to their sheer amazement at all you folks do to make it happen. I heard multiple times yesterday, “this is the most wonderful church! I can’t believe you folks do all this!” I had one long conversation with a gentleman who said he and his wife come every year. They live in Narragansett but have homes in Providence and they watch for our Bazaar to come up every year. They like it for all the usual reasons, of course – unique items well priced – but this gentleman said what impresses him the most about this church is how uniquely friendly and kind our folks are. He and his wife apparently love the Christmas Bazaar circuit, checking out all the bazaars between New London and throughout South County but ours, he insisted, is by far the best. This is so, he explained, because of the attention to detail so obvious everywhere. And, even more, the warm and generous attitude of all of our folks working. So many bazaars they go to, he said, the people are grumpy and its apparent their bazaar is something they do because they have to, not because they love to. This one, he insisted, is different. The generosity and kindness of spirit of our folks – that would be you -- shines everywhere here.

He’s right, of course. We joke about our bazaar being the best but it really is. And not because we have better or more merchandise than others do. Most churches put their best foot forward at their bazaars. Ours is the best because of who we are as a church all year round. In this church, we work at being faithful followers of Jesus. “What would Jesus do” is more than a

catch phrase around here. It is the philosophy of who we are, every day of the year. It just shines out into the community very brightly on these bazaar days. And during all the other events we do – most recently the Art Show and the Estate Sale. I had more than a few people ask me what else we had planned because they are always watching for what we're up to because they know whatever we do will be well done and fun! That is high praise these days when more and more people are turning away from churches and organized religion faced by the reality that so much evil has been done recently invoking Jesus' name and God's blessing when neither is evident in their actions. Dear ones, people actually like our church in this community during a time when organized religion is falling out of favor. People trust us to do the right thing in everything we do. That is huge!!! That is also God reminding us in the voices of all the people visiting us through the bazaar and other events that we are living into life our stated mission as a church – to be a beacon of hope to our community and the world. How wonderful is that!

In case you had forgotten, this is Stewardship Sunday and this is my Stewardship sermon for this year. Actually, each of my sermons during the last several weeks have touched on various aspects of the difference our individual stewardship – our generosity of time, talent and treasure – with this, our beloved church. I've done this because the whole notion of stewardship – of talking about the financial and people resources of the church – is a topic too easy to shy away from. The running joke in most congregational churches everywhere is that the people would rather talk about sex than money any day of the week. That's because talking about money – being honest about what it actually takes for us to be the church here in this community doing what we do – is not a fun topic. At least, most people think it isn't. I, on the other hand, love Stewardship season. I love it because it is the time when we intentionally celebrate who we are as a church – what we have already accomplished and what we

can continue to accomplish moving forward. I love it that our Stewardship campaign now usually overlaps with Bazaar season too for exactly the reasons we've been talking about. This is the perfect time of year for us to see and experience first hand that we truly are making a difference in our community in so many ways. More than we realize most of the time, I think. So, for me as your pastor, Stewardship season is about reminding you what we have already accomplished even as we imagine and recognize that there is still much left to do.

Our Stewardship Team picked this year's theme scripture verse from a variety of possibilities. It's from the Psalms – Psalm 116 to be precise. The psalms are really ancient hymns, sung in worship at the ancient Temple or even as people were making their way to the Temple. It's important to remember that the chance to worship at the Temple itself in Jerusalem was a very rare and precious experience most of the people were only able to do once or twice in a lifetime, and only then if they were lucky. In this particular psalm, the words invite us to consider all the reasons to love God, or “the Lord” as this particular phraseology uses in this hymn. I could offer you the detailed explanation of why it says “the Lord” instead of “God” and why that matters – a theological academic exercise called exegesis. It's interesting to someone like me who is enthralled by the word choices in the scriptures and what it reveals to us about who wrote what when, and why. But, honestly, today the most important thing to know about this Psalm 116 is that we can find in these words written thousands of years ago why God is important to each of us. I especially love the descriptions of God in this text: “Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; our God is merciful.” What more is there to say, really. Our God is not a vengeful, angry God just waiting for us to do something wrong. No, quite the opposite. Our God is gracious, merciful, loving. My favorite verse is actually the next one: “The Lord protects the simple.” I love that. To me, this is reassurance that none of us, myself included with all my

theological education, needs to worry about whether we know enough about God, whether we are sophisticated enough, devoted enough in our faith. God loves us as we are, simply being who God created us to be is enough.

We are reminded a few lines later than God “has dealt bountifully with you.” This is an excellent example of how reading the psalms can be tricky because the tenses can change on a dime from first person to second person to third person, from “I” to “you” to “everyone.” In this particular verse, the attention suddenly turns from first person to second person in order to remind the reader that God has been generous to you – yes, you! This is not the euphemistic abstract “you” but instead the real you, the person reading the words in the moment! God has dealt bountifully with YOU! And the list of those examples of God’s love appears in the verses to follow: God has delivered us from death, figuratively perhaps or maybe even literally. God has dried our tears. God has kept our feet from stumbling, guiding us through the land of the living. God blesses us with faith, and then helps us to hold on to it, even when it feels like so much of what we encounter in the world is a lie. Yes, indeed God has been bountiful with us, over and over again, even without our asking. Even without our realizing it much of the time.

And now we come to today’s focus verse: “what shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me?” That is the question each of us has been asked to consider as we make our pledges to the church’s budget for the next year. Of course, no question that deals so intimately with our lives – our financial and physical health and family realities – is a simple one to answer. Or so it would seem. But the truth is, it is simple, really. We choose to make it complicated, as we do so many things. We overthink it. I know I do. I want to make a pledge I know I can keep and I also know I need to challenge my family budget to do more than I think we can afford. That’s what it means to give from our “first fruits” instead of our leftovers in the family budget. It’s taken me

a long time to understand this, so if you are struggling with it, know you are in good company. And please know that all your giving to the church – pledges certainly, but also all those items purchased to support all the ministries of the church, like the Bazaar and ongoing Mission drives is part of your giving, whether or not it shows up on the giving statements you receive. We know that. Your giving in so many different ways is what makes this church who and what it is.

Still, giving of our first fruits is a vital way to acknowledge all that God has done, is doing, and will do for us. It is trusting that God does protect us, and that our church will understand if a pledge made cannot be kept because of unexpected financial changes that are too often the stuff of life. So, dear ones, your pledges are already here on the altar. They have been dedicated and blessed and we are so very grateful for your trust and your support. As I say every Sunday during the offering portion of the service, we are only here doing what we do because of everyone's ongoing generosity. Today is the day we specifically remind ourselves of that simple truth. Today is the day we celebrate that what we do, what we give, really does make a huge difference in the lives of real people – us. Amen.