

Going Deeper

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
November 17, 2024 – Stewardship Sunday
Text: Luke 5:1-7

Welcome to Stewardship Sunday! For those of you unfamiliar with this whole notion of “stewardship” as it applies to the church, or perhaps in life generally, let’s take a moment just to explain what it means. First, Webster’s does not define “stewardship” per se, but it does define the word “steward,” the root word of stewardship. A steward is, among other things, a person employed in a large household to manage domestic concerns including supervision of staff, collection of rents and keeping of accounts. Okay, so far that sounds like a Trustee for sure. But what about the rest of us? Not to worry! We’re there too. A steward is also someone who, as on a ship or a commercial airplane, is responsible for attending to the needs of the travelers including but not limited to providing food, drink and general hospitality. In other words, a steward in the church is someone who is responsible for managing domestic concerns for the church – like property maintenance and receiving and managing funds on behalf of the church members – as well as someone responsible for providing abundant hospitality to the people who come to the church, whether as worshippers, visitors or customers for events like our Bazaar. Stewardship in the church, then, is the act of being a steward or caretaker of people and things in the church and the community which surrounds it. Okay, now that makes sense! That sounds like all of us!

Too often in the church we lose track of the broader meaning of this word “stewardship” because we automatically conflate it with money and the financial resources needed to run the church. This is true, but it does not go nearly far enough! Stewardship season is a time for the church to pause to reflect more deeply on who it is, who it aspires to be and, most especially, who it is God needs the church to

be in this moment in history. Our wonderful Stewardship Team decided a more playful approach to inviting folks to these reflections this year would be helpful, and I think they've been fun and informative as to why your pledges really do matter for the vitality of the church moving forward. After considering various possibilities for our focus for this year, the team decided to go with the theme chosen for the General Synod in 2025. General Synod, for those unfamiliar with the term, refers to the gathering of the entire United Church of Christ for a five day experience reflective of the breadth and depth of our unique denomination. This gathering now takes place once every three years so the choice of focus for each one is significant, carefully discerned by the denomination's leadership. So it is no surprise that when our Stewardship Team encountered this possibility for our theme this year, the decision was an easy one.

This theme, "Into the Deep," is based on a story from the Gospel of Luke describing an encounter between Jesus and the disciples as Jesus' ministry was just beginning. Jesus was on the shore of Lake Gennesaret teaching the crowd of people who had followed him there and wanted to know more of the unique teachings about God that Jesus shared. The crowd continued to grow and so Jesus asked the one of the fisherman, Simon Peter, just bringing his boat in, to instead put out a little way from shore so Jesus could address the crowd from the boat. This worked well so Jesus could continue speaking and teaching. When he finished, he turned to Simon and told him to put out into deeper water so that he and his partners could let down their nets for a catch. Simon explained that they were exhausted because they had already been fishing all night without success. But, if Jesus thought he should, then he would. So Simon and the others took their boats out into deeper water, let down their nets and quickly caught so many fish that the nets were straining under the weight. They had to call in additional fisherman and boats to help get the catch back to shore and even those boats almost capsized. For Simon Peter and his

partners trusting Jesus to go deeper truly paid off. Worth noting though, they did not remain fisherman for long after this encounter with Jesus because they became his disciples, giving up everything to follow him and support him in his ministry for the next three years.

But what does this notion of “going deeper” combined with this Bible story about Jesus and Simon Peter and have to do with our stewardship theme this year? Clearly, we are hoping everyone will turn in a pledge this year and we want to acknowledge that we know this ask may very well entail “going deeper” into the proverbial pocketbooks. This is not something we ask lightly, nor is it asked without deep thought, especially in light of the election results which have some frightened and worried while others anticipate wonderful things on the horizon. Both realities are fully present in our church and our community right now. And that is precisely why our at times groundbreaking ministries matter so much in our community. I was back in the Book Nook all day so I don’t know if I was the only one this happened to, but I had more than a few customers refuse to accept any change back from their purchases (my most expensive item was \$2!) and they said it was because our church does “such good work.” They told me they knew and appreciated that our church makes a real difference in the community and therefore in their lives. They wanted me to know that. That wanted us to know that. And now, I want to be sure you know that. What we does make a difference, a real difference, in the lives of real people – ourselves included! What we do matters, which is why what you give matters. And please know that we understand that folks on fixed incomes can only give so much. We appreciate every dollar we receive from those tight budgets. However, we also know that there are folks who can afford to give more. We humbly ask that you consider sharing from your abundance with the church. In all candor, that’s what this Stewardship season is all about. We truly appreciate all you are already doing, whatever the amounts of those pledges already received are, know that we are truly

grateful. For those of you still wondering about what to give or whether pledging really matters, please keep the church in mind. After all, the money we have to work with is the money we receive through offerings, pledges and donations. Plus, of course, the money we raise through events like yesterday's Bazaar.

And Holy Cow! What a day that was! None of us have ever seen the crowds we had yesterday which is why, unfortunately, there are not too many baked goods available for purchase during Fellowship Time today. The Baked Goods were wiped out! The Nostalgia Boutique, the Jewelry, the Christmas trees and wreaths – all with substantially reduced inventory! In one day! \$9000+ in one day. Wow. Just wow. And let's not forget YOU did that! You. Working year round. Baking for weeks. Decorating wreaths and little trees as glue gun burns stacked up. Jewelry patiently sorted, displayed and priced. Nostalgia Boutique's carefully curated inventory causing a near over-crowding issue at one point! Just wow!

I do want to share one conversation I had about the Bazaar yesterday with an older lady who paused for a bit of quiet in the Book Nook. She even bought a few books – Erin Hildebrand novels. She commented to me, once she realized I was the pastor, that she and her husband had never in all their lives been to a Bazaar like ours. She told me she was so impressed by how “professionally” (her words) organized it was, how high quality the merchandise was, how excellent the prices were and how absolutely every single person who was working the Bazaar was. “I've never seen anything like this,” she kept saying. “You all just don't stop smiling!!! You love this!”

“Yes, we do,” I answered. “This is our gift to the community.”

“Well, this must be a very big church, to be able to pull this off. You must be a very big church.”

“The physical plant of the church is large, yes. But, the congregation – no, not really. We are a small, vital church. We love who we are and what we do.” At this she absolutely stopped searching

through her purse and just looked at me. “Small? You are a small church? Well, my goodness.” And then she walked off with her husband mumbling to herself. I didn’t even have a chance to tell her about the bottom floor being dedicated to community needs like Operation Fresh Start and providing a home base to 12 Step Groups and as practice space for a local musician.

Dear ones, we ARE a small vital church and you are the ones who make it vital! You are always going deeper in everything you tackle. For the Bazaar I watched and listened as you dug deep to make one more wreath, bake one more batch of cookies, create just one more basket, unpack one more box of antique linen, go through one more bag of dropped off jewelry. You already know what it means to go deeper in what you do for our church. I get that. I do want you to know also that our just being here – doing what we do, being who we are as a bastion of positivity and hope and even safety for our LGBTQ+ community in these fraught times – people are noticing what we are doing and what we stand for. They know and appreciate what makes us different from other churches. People are grateful we’re here. They may never come to worship – although you never know – but they know us, they respect us, and they support us. That, dear ones, is real gift and blessing. We are a church making a difference and we know it, thanks to all our “guests” yesterday. That is value beyond price.

I want to end this morning with a story about, of all things, one of the days I drove down to the church this past week. No, it’s not another “bridge-mageddon” story, although I have plenty. No, this is a story from my drive down on Wednesday morning. As I rounded the curve after the 95 South exit for Nooseneck Hill Road (it used to be Exit 6 – I have the new exit numbers!), I noticed smoke on the horizon. I immediately figured out it was a brush fire but I thought it was off the highway in a field. As I drove closer, I realized it was the median strip on fire and it had already jumped the highway and was

burning on the embankment heading south. I called 911 and reported it – they already knew and trucks were on the way. But as I got closer, I saw a northbound tractor trailer truck pulled over on the far side of 95North. Then I saw the driver, coatless and wearing what looked like driving shoes, not heavy boots, just stomping out the fire along its edge. One guy, stomping out the brush fire which was by now at least one and half football fields long. One guy. Trying to make a difference. Keeping the fire from the jumping the highway on the northbound side until the fire trucks could get there. One guy. Making a difference. A huge difference, even though he knew he could never deal with the whole fire by himself. Dear ones, that was not his goal. He just wanted to do whatever little bit he could to make a difference. And he did.

That, dear ones, is what Stewardship Sunday is really all about. Making a difference however and whenever we can. Going deeper within ourselves, especially when we're not even sure what that might mean never mind what we think we can do. That's the thing. Going deeper in faith, in uncovering and recovering meaning in our lives, in doing what we can as we can – that's what Jesus did every day. And he did it while living in the midst of extreme poverty and a brutal empire. He did it because he knew it was what God was asking him to do. Dear ones, Jesus didn't dwell on all the reasons what he was doing wouldn't work, couldn't work or make a difference in the way he wanted to. He was, after all, just one guy with some other men and women he inspired to do the same. Just one guy. And he changed the world. Imagine that. The footsteps we follow are indeed life-changing and we, dear ones, are more than up to the task. Praise Jesus. Amen.