

STEWARDSHIP UP CLOSE¹
Mark 12: 38-44
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
November 8, 2009

In every fall stewardship campaign I encounter two opposite approaches to stewardship. The first I would call the Eeyore approach. I'm sure you remember Eeyore and his friends Christopher Robin and Winnie the Pooh and Piglet and all the rest. On one occasion Christopher Robin and Pooh are greeting each other: "Good morning, Christopher Robin...Good morning Winnie the Pooh." And they turn to Eeyore and say, "Good morning, Eeyore." To which Eeyore replies gloomily, "If it is a good morning, which I doubt."²

I

Some approach this season of stewardship with a sense of gloomy inevitability and doubt. They have a let's-just-get-it-over-with sentiment that Eeyore would appreciate.

The other approach I think of as the II Corinthians 9: 7 approach. Here is what that text says: *Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.*

The word translated "cheerful" in this text is the Greek word *hilaron*,

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² From *Winnie the Pooh and the Honey Tree* (1966).

which is the origin of our word hilarious. We could translate it, *God loves a hilarious giver!* Since when is stewardship hilarious? When was the last time you hilariously filled out your pledge card? The word means full of joy, and I hope that in that sense stewardship will be hilarious. When does giving fill you with a sense of joy? Answer: when you give to someone or something you love, when you give all you can, not trying to figure out how little you can give but how much. It is giving with a bit of giddiness to it. It is staring budget deficits and stock market dips and economic woes in the face and saying, "Just try me. I can overcome you because I love this church."

II

We give with joy to people and institutions we love. There is a genuine happiness, a holy hilarity to it. Here are some good reasons to love this church:

- It's a place that tries to keep the story of Jesus alive and contemporary in a world that obviously ignores him.
- It's a place that welcomes all because love is greater than legalism and openness is greater than exclusion.
- It's a place where there is freedom both for pulpit and pew, freedom to think and freedom to explore, and most of all, freedom to follow the way of Christ wherever it leads.

- It's a place where children are loved and nurtured, youth are valued and listened to, and Christian education takes a high priority.
- It's a place that honors the beauty of holiness as well as doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God.
- It is a place that honors the Baptist tradition of freedom but embraces all denominations.
- It's a place that engages community concerns and takes community leadership seriously.
- It's a place where sacred promises are made, holy tears are shed, hallowed memories are kept alive, godly decisions are encouraged, celestial beauty is experienced, sainted wisdom is honored, powerful ceremonies are upheld, sacred scripture is studied, compassion is lived, justice is esteemed, forgiveness is practiced, strengths are celebrated, embraces are free, differences are respected, laughter is sincere, talents are offered, integrity is expected, kindness is open-hearted, faithfulness is a virtue, testimonies are worthy, accomplishments are celebrated, courage is in abundance, and stewardship is joyful.

God needs great institutions, not just great Christians. God needs great congregations, not just great individuals. We live in a time when people love to hate institutions. They grumble about them, malign them as lifeless

bureaucracies, and laugh when they are dysfunctional. Churches as institutions are going through a period of distrust, brought on not only by a cultural shift away from religion in general, but also by highly publicized clergy sexual abuse cases, financial misconduct, and blatantly hypocritical television evangelists. It is the “in thing” to say that one is spiritual but not religious. Institutions are not popular these days.

Too many Americans have been satiated at the well of romantic individualism and have stuffed themselves full at the trough of anti-institutionalism. In that climate, Christians have been seduced into thinking that we can discover our best selves through introspection and self-help manuals. We have pretended that authentic Christianity can occur solely between an individual and God. It’s “Jesus and me” and the community of faith is a nuisance.

This church gladly declares without equivocation that Christian faith needs robust institutions. Flourishing churches are crucial not only to individual lives but to thriving communities. Those of us who are entrusted with the high calling of preserving, nurturing, and strengthening the church have come to appreciate the necessity of caring for this institution as a Christian virtue. This place matters. This community matters. The mission we hold matters.

When economic challenges and cultural turmoil are troubling even strong institutions, we cannot afford any longer to buy into the cultural cynicism and distrust of this institution to which we are committed and for which we are grateful. We need to reaffirm and take pride in our love for this church as an institution and joyfully invest our resources to support it.

III

Jesus once held up the giving of a poor widow as a model of how to support an institution like the church. We are told that she offered two copper coins to support the institution of the Temple. Then Jesus said to his disciples, *Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.*

This scene makes us want to run down to the Temple treasury and shout out, “Wait! Don’t put both coins in! Save at least something for yourself! You may need it tomorrow!” But let’s just imagine what Jesus and his disciples had been witnessing that day. They watched as people strutted into the Temple treasury and pulled out their moneybags at a carefully calculated time when the most people would witness their generosity. They watched the sanctimonious, self-serving guardians of orthodoxy as they

carefully poured their coins into the receptacle and listened with pleasure at the sound of hundreds of coins entering the Temple treasury. Then, acting as if they were unaware of the eyes of those watching, they assumed an attitude of oily self-righteousness and slowly slithered out of the treasury.

Just when they had witnessed all the hypocrisy they could stomach, someone notices this poor widow making her way into the room. Who knows? Maybe Jesus knew this woman. Maybe he knew that this woman was giving sacrificially because she loved the institution so much and took joy in giving. Maybe there was a genuine smile of joy on her face instead of a smirk of self-righteousness. But for whatever reason, Jesus held her up as a model for us all.

IV

Next Sunday we will do what we do every year...what every church I know does about this time of year. We will present our pledge cards as a part of our worship. Someone might ask, "Why do it as part of our worship?" The answer to that, of course, is that our pledges ARE a form of worship. This is one of those times when stewardship is not just an abstract concept, it is something up close and personal. We are declaring our intent to be faithful stewards of our financial resources—not just for any good cause, but for this church that we love.

The story of the poor widow reminds us that every pledge is important. There may have been a time when a few wealthy people could pledge the budget all by themselves if needed. That time is long gone, and that change can empower each individual as we realize that every pledge is crucial. It takes every one of us pledging our resources because we are committed to this institution.

Incidentally, there is nothing secretive about how we spend the money given to this church. The budget is there for all to see. Behind every item in the church budget is ministry that we offer to the world. The phone bill? Yes, it is a ministry of caring and communicating with people who are in need. Utilities? Yes, a ministry, for every time we heat this church, every time we turn on the lights, every time we open the doors we are bearing a witness for the gospel that propelled the creation of this church nearly two centuries ago. Salaries? Yes, a ministry, for careful administration of a complex seven-day-a-week organization that ministers to a host of people who use this church every day of the week is a vital ministry to the world. Whether we continue to carry out that gospel calling for another two centuries depends on the faithfulness of each generation.

V

I remember seeing in some movie a scene of people coming together for a barn-raising. The movie-maker used quick-time filming so that we could see the barn raised in a matter of seconds with the help of the whole community working in this act of neighborliness.

The fall stewardship campaign is like a barn-raising—it is a community budget-raising. We are a community working together to build not only a budget and a year of ministry and mission together, but building on a nearly two century old sturdy foundation to further insure the future of this community of faith. In the process we are building a people, a generous people on joyful mission for God.

A week from today, let Pledge Sunday be one of the happiest, most joy-filled times of the year, for we have it on good authority that *God loves a hilarious giver!*