

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from November 11, 2007

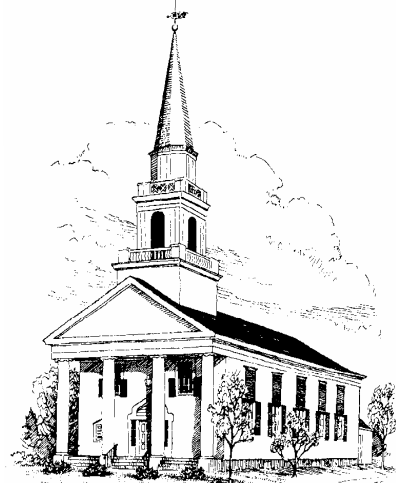
Rev. Barbara J. Libby

“Sharing Our Abundance and Giving Thanks”

Scriptures:

Haggai 1:15-2:9

Psalm 145



I've been thinking this week of those early memories we carry with us. You know the ones—memories of food or smells, memories of particular places or special people in our early years, memories of special events or moments that, when we tap into them, we can bring back into focus so sharply that they seem like just yesterday. Who knows why it is we remember what we do or how it is that our minds store so many memories. I've also been thinking this week about my own memories about things concerning money.

Today is *Pledge Sunday* here at Mystic Congregational Church and we come today to dedicate all the pledges that folks have made to this year's stewardship campaign over recent weeks. Does that word *stewardship* give you a sinking feeling? Do you have positive or negative feelings when we talk about stewardship each year? When we talk about being good stewards as part of who we are as Christians, I hope it evokes something positive. Do we get a little uncomfortable when the preacher suggests that our checkbooks do reflect our moral and spiritual values? And where did those values come from anyway?

I've been thinking about my own memories concerning money this week. I did not come from a family of great means; I came from a very middle class family. I do remember receiving weekly allowances—moneys that my brothers and I were given so that we could learn to handle money. I remember opening a bank account and depositing money into that account at various times.

My dad was an educator for most of my early years—a high school principal who then became a public servant at the State Department of Education in New Hampshire. My mother served as a Christian educator at the local congregational/UCC church. It was in Concord, New Hampshire where I spent nearly all my school years from kindergarten through 8th grade.

I also remember clearly that my dad, in his late 40's, made the decision that he wanted to return to teaching in the public school classroom. Teaching was something he loved and which made his heart sing. It was clear that, in spite of all the changes it involved, my dad was making a decision based on his heart and not on his wallet. This was a pretty significant decision for us all since it precipitated a move by the entire family to a new community and a smaller house as well. I also remember that we were all told that this move would involve a pay cut for my dad.

The only other memory about money in my childhood years seems pretty pertinent to this *Pledge Sunday* and today's focus on pledging. I do remember that, each Sunday before we left for church, either my mother or my father would write out a check and place it into their weekly offering

envelope. As I reflect on this, this routine was one of the only times I can recall seeing the checkbook and seeing the connection between money and the church.

As a member of the children's junior choir through all my elementary years, I remember each Sunday in the early weekly worship that the offering plates were always passed as we sang the anthem. I understood from an early age that there was an expectation and an assumption that we all participated in the church and that that participation included our financial gifts as well as the gifts of our time and our talent. Somewhere along the line I, too, received offering envelopes. And I, too, began the weekly ritual of making a donation to the church commensurate with the kind of income I had at that time.

But what I'm really aware of now as I look back on it is that my giving to the church began and was modeled and undergirded by the ritual I observed my parents making at home—that every week a check was written and was placed into the offering envelope.

As the Stewardship Committee began its work this past summer and established the theme for this year's campaign as *Moving Forward Together*, we realized that we make the assumption that everyone "knows" about giving to the church. We tend to assume that all of us have come from families and traditions where the idea of making a weekly donation to the church is the norm. We even tend to make the assumption that "everyone" knows why we need money here at the church and that we don't need to do too much talking about money, especially not in church.

I am here to tell you today that we rarely talk about money anywhere, much less in church. Especially here in New England—we don't seem to talk about money easily and we tend to avoid talking about money in church. The odd thing about that is that Jesus himself spent a lot of time talking about money—its impact on us human beings and some of the dangers and pitfalls of money. Jesus had lots to say about money!

Today's text for this *Pledge Sunday* from the Psalms really does seem to be a wonderful Psalm for this Sunday! Not only does this Psalm help us get the focus right; it begins at the very beginning—with God as creator and source of all abundant blessings in our lives. It is helpful on this *Pledge Sunday* to remember to credit the one who began it all. It is God's goodness and God's tender care for all of creation, including us, that should generate all our giving. Instead of saying that we give back to God a portion of what we have received, the Christian steward believes that all we have belongs to God. Now that may sound a bit odd to some of us: "All we have belongs to God?" If we really believe that, if we truly believe that all we have and all we enjoy truly belongs to God, there would be no limits at all on our generosity, would there?

Why are we here today on this *Pledge Sunday*? Why is it that we focus on a Psalm that focuses entirely on the blessings of God this day? One commentator puts it this way:

At the heart of our Jewish ancestors' faith, and at the heart of our faith, is the conviction that God has created us in love, that God remembers us, and that we need God and are expected to respond to God

Stewardship is not about paying the bills or covering a budget (or making up a deficit). It is our participation in the beauty of the creative process that continues even today—God's creative hand at work in the world. It is our response to everything in this Psalm: *God's goodness and the vision of how things are supposed to be, how God intends them to be.* (Online UCC Samuel on text)

I hope that we can sit here this morning and list the many ways that God has blessed us and gifted us! I hope that each of us feels abundantly blessed! I hope we can celebrate an abundance of tal-

ent—brain power, athletic prowess, creative energy, ingenuity. Each one of us brings different strengths—of mind, body and spirit. We may be able to celebrate an abundance of love and affection in our lives. We may be able to celebrate an abundance of family and friends. We may be able to celebrate an abundance of success in our professional lives, an abundance of property or, or even an abundance of financial success. Fundamentally, each of us, in spite of all the challenges that life deals us, we can each sit here this morning and celebrate the blessings in our lives!

Rather than focus on any scarcity that there might be in our lives, we would do well to focus on the abundance in our lives! We are abundantly blessed. As our culture and our world becomes increasingly aware of the fragility of this planet and the vulnerability of God's creation, we can celebrate all the amazing gifts of planet Earth. And we all know that the earth's distress isn't about God's actions but our own.

Good stewardship is all about hope for the world!

Good stewardship is all about gratitude for what we've received!

Good stewardship is all about sharing the overflow of blessings from God.

As we bring our gifts and pledges this day and in every week in the coming year, let us give thanks to God; let us continue to praise our Creator; let us share in the longing for the dream of God, for what is yet to be! Amen.

