

CARE: “Empower Our Future”

Text: Acts 2: 43-47

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Our New England ancestors . . . surely faced challenges bringing our church into being 300 years ago, but on this small matter we can be quite certain: inspiring and motivating people to give hard-earned money to empower the church was just as hard then as it is now!

The plain fact of the matter is that when the General Assembly of the Colony of Connecticut received the request that a church be formed, one of the more significant points of discussion was about who would pay for this new church!¹ If our founding charter was granted, it would mean that the townspeople of Hartford would need to support four congregations, not just three. And while our 29 charter members argued that there was critical mass and ample resources, not every one agreed! Besides, over time, what about a building, and where would the firewood come from to heat it, and, by the way, who would pay the preacher? The more things change, the more they remain the same!

And get this! Did you know that congregations of that early Colonial variety² almost immediately expanded their staff and hired someone to raise the money to fund their church? Apparently, no one, or very few, would take it on voluntarily! So the position of the tithing-man was created and his job was to enforce the rules of the Sabbath chief, among which were expectations about giving. In those days, taxes were levied on the general population to support the church, and the tithing-man was the collector of such funds. If anyone skipped worship on a Sunday morning in an attempt to avoid the tax, he would be on their doorstep before evening! And while there, he would not only collect their due-share, he would also levy a fine for ignoring the obligation of being at worship!

And more, too! The job required multi-tasking. He was to keep order in the Meeting House ó a task he enforced with the help of something called a tithing stick. By wielding its silent and public threat, he made sure that people sat in the right pews ó and by the way, the front seats were closest to the wood stove and most often occupied by those whose contributions were the largest. And this I love: men who liked to snooze during the sermon were bopped on the head with a rounded part of the tithing stick; or, if such be a woman, a feather would be used to tickle her to wakefulness or attention.

Of course, it wasn't always like this. There was a time when the nascent church, the gathered body of Christ, then simply called People of the Way, were so energized by the grace of God and the power of the Spirit that they needed no such enforcer! They were in every way contagious, alive with the Good News. They couldn't get enough of being together and hearing the stories of Jesus.

Just listen to the sweep of a few of the phrases that Luke provides us that we might become infected, too!³ óEveryone was in awe at the signs and wonders being told! All believers lived in wonderful harmony holding everything in common. They gave fully of

themselves, selling whatever they owned and pooling their resources so that each person's need was met. They followed daily practices of worship, of prayer, and of breaking bread. Every meal together was a celebration. They partook with glad and generous hearts as they praised God. And everyday their numbers grew!

Anthony Padovano, theologian, poet and pastor, gives me exactly the right words to express this. He once wrote: "We shall become Christians on that morning when we laugh and sing for the right reasons; and when we weep not because we have lost something, but because we were given so much."

At least five times in as many weeks I have been in such company! Contagious, faith-filled, pressed down and running over! They were moments when the pure glimmer of God's light was so bright as to light up anyone's darkness.

I saw it on the face of Stephanie Woods and her children as Dale Wolfe handed over the keys to their new home on Liberty Street in Hartford. I felt it as Nanette knelt in prayer before a widely diverse body of Christ conspired with the Holy Spirit to ordain her. I caught a glimpse of it as three giggling girls were running through their church only to dash around a corner and face straight into me! I have been lifted by it as the choir and Jim have dared new tunes and movements to invite us into new ways of prayer and praise. And I have known it as I sing with you "surely the presence of the Lord is in this place." These all, moments when we laugh and sing for the right reasons, and when we weep not because we have lost something, but because we were given so much!

This is where it meets the ground for us this morning. Somewhere between the bops and tickles of the tithing-man í and the nascent Spirit of the People of the Wayí we need to talk. Honestly, we simply need to look one another in the eye and speak the truth in love.

And here's why. One of the mission-critical insights from our recent planning process is that our survival as a congregation requires that we come out of hiding about the "m" (money) word in our church, and openly discuss the crucial matter of our finances. Among the 85 people who participated in our conversations, the litany kept coming around: "We have got to talk about this stuff!" So here are four facts that I want you to trouble yourself with.

1. As a congregation, we are entirely dependent on your gifts. Apparently, not everyone is aware of this. In fact, some think that this whole giving thing at the church is not at all necessary. But it is. What we do simply could not happen, would not happen, without your support ó which amounts to something like \$500,000 a year given by 215 families or individuals.

2. Of that \$500,000, the majority comes from those who are in their latter years of life. It's hard to say that softly! Without a tithing man to wake us up, well, that could mean extinction, unless other ways of financing the church can be found ó and fast. Yikes! Or it will mean that a serious season of budget reduction is not too far down the road.

3. Our second largest source of revenue is our endowment, but even at a conservative draw-rate, we are spending that at an unsustainable pace. Absent an increase in giving, those gifts from the past will simply go away. I fear we may have seen it the other way around: so long as the endowment is there, we don't need to take giving seriously.

4. We have been commendably frugal. Our current budget is \$100,000 less than it was ten years ago, and it has remained flat since the recession interrupted all of us. But still, we are among the 62% of congregations whose chins are at the water line.

Please, don't shoot the messenger here! It's just the way things are! I thought of trying to find a tithing-man to tell you all of this for today. But I knew that no one wanted the job. And still, these are some facts with which we must reckon.

I know that you will take this seriously and in the spirit of love. I know that you love the church, along with me, and want the best for her. I know that talking about money is not comfortable for any of us, and yet I also know that talk we must. For in the wisdom of Augustine, "without God, we cannot . . . and without us, God will not."

In the Living Spirit of Jesus. Amen.

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¹ Matthew Spinka. [A History of the First Church of Christ Congregational, West Hartford. 1713-1963.](#)

² Nancy S. Taylor, "Dignifying the Seats in the Meeting House" Old South Church, Boston, November 22, 2009.

³ Eugene Peterson, The Message.

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