

## Celebrating Stewardship of Money Sunday, 10/1/17

**1** Today we continue our journey together of reclaiming stewardship as a joyful, life-long calling. Stewardship was never intended to be a boring or manipulative annual campaign of guilt. If not that, then what? I like this particular definition of stewardship: “Stewardship is receiving God’s gifts gratefully, cherishing and tending them in a responsible and accountable manner, sharing them in justice and love with others, and returning them with increase to the Lord.”<sup>1</sup> One of the things I love about that definition is that it’s full of action verbs: receiving, cherishing, tending, sharing, and returning. I also love that it’s rooted in Scriptural truth. But the thing about it that really makes it pop for me is that it starts and ends with God, receiving God’s gifts and returning God’s gifts. That’s exactly the way it’s supposed to be for us as God’s stewards. Our stewardship in God’s kingdom begins and ends with God, not us. If we can learn to recognize that, then the part we play in between can be marked with joy.

**2** We continue our celebration this morning with the stewardship of money. After last-week’s message on the stewardship of time, I couldn’t resist using this picture of a VISA card on an Apple Watch, mainly because there are so many striking parallels between the stewardship of time and the stewardship of money. Many of the same teachings apply. For example, “you can’t give what you don’t have” applies equally well to both. That’s why we offer classes like Financial Peace University and the current series running this month between services. Budgets allow us to create margin in our financial lives- a space between where we’re at and what our limits are. Just as in the stewardship of time, it’s difficult to find joy in the stewardship of money if you haven’t managed to create some margin in your financial life by saying “no” to some of your current spending habits.

I invite you to watch this video that captures the journey of stewardship so well. As you watch it, ask yourself: “Do I really believe this? If I do, then how does my financial life reflect that belief? Can I honestly say that I celebrate the stewardship of money in my life?”

**{Play “Stewardship of Money” video, 1:35}**

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<sup>1</sup> [http://stdunstan.ca/linked/the\\_difference\\_between\\_joyful\\_giving\\_and\\_stewardship.pdf](http://stdunstan.ca/linked/the_difference_between_joyful_giving_and_stewardship.pdf)

**3** Joyful stewardship begins with recognizing how blessed we are to simply wake up each day. I know that all of us have faced days when we've questioned just where God's blessings were hidden in it, but I suspect that it's our perspective that's been off on those days rather than God's grace. Talk to Brian Gilson or any number of others who have walked away from car accidents or illnesses that should have ended their lives. Near-death experiences tend to bring into sharp relief the spiritual truth that each day can and should be filled with recognizing God's blessings and receiving them with gratitude and praise in our hearts.

If you had to rate your attitude of gratitude this morning, on a scale from one to ten, would you be a "one," I'm disappointed with life and angry with God; or a "ten," I'm grateful to be alive and thankful to God for another day? Go ahead and take a few seconds to give that some thought. You can even write it down if you like. **{Pause for maybe 15 seconds}**

**4** Once we've rooted ourselves in a daily attitude of gratitude, we have to come to grips with God's command that we return a portion of our blessings to God. I hate this picture of an offering plate, which is exactly why I chose it. Do you know what I hate about it? It looks like left overs. Hear me now- I'm not saying that a few dollars or some loose change couldn't represent sacrificial giving for some of us. What I am saying is that many of us are giving this way, with left overs, despite God pouring out abundant riches in our lives. And here is where the rubber hits the road for many of us in our journey to find more joy in stewardship. It's really not the money God is after, it's our hearts. That's why we read things like "God loves a cheerful giver"<sup>2</sup> And "[W]here your treasure is, there your heart will be also."<sup>3</sup> The problem is, we can't possibly be cheerful givers if our hearts are given to anything other than God. The lack of margin we have in our financial lives is often a reflection of our unbridled appetite for material pleasures. None of us are surprised by Paul's words to Timothy, "Lust for money brings trouble and nothing but trouble," and yet most of us struggle with ordering our financial lives and many of us return blessings back to God as an afterthought rather than a priority. That's no way to find joy in giving.

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<sup>2</sup> 2Corinthians 9:7, NIV

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 6:21, NIV

If you had to rate your cheerfulness and generosity in giving this morning, on a scale from one to ten, would you be a “one,” I’m fearful about the money I have and unwilling to share it with anyone, including God; or a “ten,” I’m eager to return a portion of what I’ve received to multiply God’s blessings in the world? Go ahead and take a few seconds to give that some thought. You can even write it down if you like. **{Pause for maybe 15 seconds}**

**5** I have some bad news and some good news for us, and it’s all in this picture. The writing is pretty small on this slide, so I encourage you all to find the bulletin insert that looks like this. The bad news is that as of September 22, the top ten giving units in our congregation are contributing about a third of the ministry investments through the General Fund, Building Fund, and Apportionment payments. In this chart, the big numbers on the staircase represent the number of giving units on record here for 2017 at any particular giving level through September 22. Each step up on the staircase represents an increase in weekly giving. In the bottom left, the number 37 is on the step marked zero. Thirty-seven of our worshipping families or singles contribute zero dollars in a way that we can identify.

In contrast, in the upper right, the number 2 appears twice- two of our giving units contribute between \$150 and \$199 per week, while two more contribute more than \$200 per week. You can also see that the top twenty giving units are contributing almost half of the ministry dollars. I know that at least some of these households aren’t just giving more because they have more- they’re tithing, offering 10% or more of what they first received from God back to God, with a grateful heart.

Returning to the lower left part of the diagram, more than half of us are investing \$20 or less per week in the Kingdom work of Buffalo UMC. To put that in perspective, the average drive-through bill at MacDonald’s for a family of four is just under \$30. While it’s true that some of us really can’t afford a trip to MacDonald’s, most of us can. That’s the bad news. Most of us are spending more at MacDonald’s or the like each week than we are returning to God. And I believe that also means that most of us are shortchanging ourselves from the joy of healthy financial stewardship.

Now here’s the good news: We can change this. We can have more joy in our lives and also see ministries flourish in our church and communities. Here’s how it works. Find

where you are on this staircase in terms of weekly giving. Let's say you're one of our worshippers who makes no offering. What would you have to do to arrange your life to create enough financial margin to allow you to take one step forward in your giving, from zero to something? Even one dollar a week, \$52 dollars a year, is something to get you on the journey of joyful stewardship. And if you're already doing that but dropping a dollar bill in the offering plate, I encourage you to put it in an offering envelop with your name on it. We'll send you quarterly giving statements to help stay on track with your giving plan.

If you're currently at the \$10 to \$19.99 a week step, what would it take for you to free up some of God's money to allow you to invest at the next level, \$20 to \$29.99 a week? And yes, I encourage the top twenty givers to examine their giving as well. What would you have to change in your life to enable you to take one step up in your giving for 2018?

The beauty of God's plan for proportional giving is that God knows that you can't give what you don't have, so God only asks for a portion of what you've received. Our work is disciplining our hearts and our financial lives so we can create enough financial margin to allow us to respond generously to God's goodness. Will you consider taking a step up in your giving for 2018? On Sunday, October 15<sup>th</sup> we'll be consecrating our estimates of giving for the new year. This is such an important time in the life of our congregation, I hope you'll be here and bring your estimate of giving card. I'm also asking you to begin living into any planned increases in your giving this year, rather than waiting until January, to allow us catch up with the 2017 financial needs of our growing ministries.

**6** Remember that video we started with? God doesn't ask us to return a portion to him capriciously, for no good reason. When we let God use the blessings he first gave to us, God just keeps on pouring out blessings: on us, and on others. The hungry are fed. The hurting are healed. The broken receive hope. The lost are found. Last week we baptized two children into the family of Christ. Before that, we confirmed twelve young men and women into their faith and membership in our congregation. The dollars you wisely invest in the life of our congregation make it possible for us to celebrate and form the many stages of our lives and the lives of our children. They equip us to reach out in mission, whether it's to a hurting family in our congregation, the Buffalo Food Shelf, or to hurricane victims in Puerto Rico.

How cool is it to know that God is inviting us to grow in our stewardship of sharing God's blessings with the world? Try to take just one step forward and see what happens.

Remember the words of the Prophet Malachi: "Test me in this," says the Lord Almighty, "And see if I will not throw open the floodgates of Heaven, and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it."<sup>4</sup>



## *Buffalo United Methodist Church*

*...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!*



**609 8<sup>th</sup> Street NW  
Buffalo, MN 55313  
763-682-3538**

**Bill Reinhart, Pastor**  
*pastorbill@buffaloumc.com*

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<sup>4</sup> Malachi 3:10, NIV