

20/20: Clear Vision

1/2 Stewardship

Joel 2:28-29

10 18 2009 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

Introduction to Series

This morning we are beginning a two week focus on Christian stewardship. Today's sermon is entitled **20/20: Clear Vision**. We are focusing upon our church's ministry and mission during challenging times. Next week's sermon is **20/10: Better than Average Vision**. We will see how financial faithfulness is a spiritual discipline that enables us to grow in giving and in grace. The overarching Scripture passage for the series is Joel 2:28-29. Listen closely now to the reading of God's Word.

Introduction

Two years ago on October 9, 2007 the Dow Jones Industrial Average reached a record high 14,164.53. At the time, few suspected this represented the high water mark of the American economy. However, the financial market soon headed south. At its lowest point over the past eight quarters, the stock market lost almost 40% of its value.

You know, the stock market—the place where the United Methodist Church kept my pensions' money—past tense! I'm just curious—has anyone else here been concerned about the economy?!?

I. Trying Times

My wife's family tells a story about her paternal grandfather who everyone called **Big Jim**. One day Big Jim and his adult son, Ronnie, decided to go fishing. They packed their equipment into the boat. Then they hooked the trailer to the truck and headed for the lake. Along the way, Big Jim hit a huge pothole in the road. Ronnie heard an odd noise and looked out the side window. He watched as the boat and trailer went flying past them! According to Ronnie, he turned to Big Jim and asked, "Daddy, did you remember to attach the safety chains to the trailer?" The boat continued along its way until the trailer wrapped itself around a tree.

Substitute the word "economy" for "boat" and you have an apt description of the present **financial crisis**. It's been a scary ride—like the *Six Flags* rollercoaster, *The Scream Machine*—just without seatbelts and safety rails! Hopefully, the economy has hit rock bottom and headed up; but forecasts indicate it will be a long, hard climb.

The global crisis has affected us all: individuals, families, businesses, social agencies, schools, and government. And, yes, we have also felt the ripple effects in the **church**. Projected income has been down. We have been trying to do more with less. I have always preached and practiced transparency and honesty about money at Sam Jones. The latest budget figures are published monthly in the newsletter because the Finance Committee wants the congregation to be fully informed.

I am not one to cry "*Wolf*;" and I deplore preachers who create crises in order to raise funds. However, we face challenging times together. In order for the church of Jesus

Christ to fulfill its mission and ministry in this time and place, every one of us must be willing to step forward with faith in the face of fear.

II. Signs of the Times

An old adage declares: *Every cloud has a silver lining*. At the risk of sounding like a wild-eyed optimist, I believe that the financial crisis has provided us with some unique opportunities. It has forced us to take a second look at how we manage our money; and it has raised questions about extravagant spending, leveraged lifestyles, and materialistic assumptions.

Athletic coaches often tell their players that adverse situations demand a “*Gut Check*.” Do they have the intestinal fortitude to overcome difficult challenges? The economy has forced us to take a “*Wallet Check*.” People have made tough decisions about what they must live with and what they can live without. I know at our house that we no longer buy something unless we really need it.

The staff and leadership have gone through the same process at the church. Through September, we have UNDER spent a barebones budget by \$93,800. We have not compromised the highest standards of ministry, but we have done without anything that’s not an absolute necessity.

Over the past months, I have been approached by people with a similar question: “Has the economy affected how people give to the church?” I have a short answer and a longer answer. The short answer is “YES!”

The longer answer is: “It depends. Some people give to God their first and best. The first check they write each month supports the church, and it represents a proportion of their income. These giving patterns have *tended* not to change. However, others give what is last and left. They wait until all the other bills are paid and then give a portion of the remainder. These giving patterns have been radically affected.”

The bottom line is that we all possess only so much money. So we have to make tough choices about how we allocate limited resources. Our priorities predetermine payments. The financial crisis has magnified the importance of these monetary choices.

III. Investment Advice

I have a friend who is more financially savvy than me. Before the stock market plummeted last year, he moved his pension funds into a very conservative account. He avoided a huge loss. But, wait—I’m not done. THEN he put his money in the most stable of investments: bank stocks! Well, you win some and you lose some. Whenever we discuss financial matters, he sometimes says, “I don’t give investment advice, but . . . !” Well, I certainly don’t give investment advice, but allow me to give you some investment advice today!

Let’s begin with some class work. Everyone please take out your **church budget**. What—you don’t have it with you? I KNOW that you keep it in your Bible. Oh, you didn’t bring a Bible, either? Huh—MUST be a Methodist crowd!

Let's face it—church budgets are not terribly exciting. When was the last time you saw a headline in the church newsletter that said: *Five Saved at Finance Committee Meeting* or *Youth Called to Ministry during Offering*? It just doesn't happen!

Take our church budget for instance. What do you see when you look at it? It can be viewed from a variety of perspectives. It covers 4 full pages on an Excel worksheet. It's divided into six major categories with a *Grand Total* of \$1,457,768 for 2009.

Now take a second look from a different perspective. Look beyond the numbers. See the faces behind the figures and the ministry beyond the money. A church budget is actually a **theological document** that gives an overview of God's people in mission.

During stewardship sermons, you've often heard me talk about the spiritual and Biblical discipline of **tithing**—giving one-tenth of our income for God's work. I believe this is true both on an individual and a corporate level. The church ought to practice what it preaches. So what about our budget? How much do we give towards missions?

There's several different ways to answer that question. United Methodists belong to a **connectional church**. This means that we participate in a denomination far larger than our congregation. In 2009, we give \$141,317 in "**apportionments**" that support the church's work on a district, conference, national, and international level. This figure alone is almost a tithe of our budget.

However, the entire *Section II* of the budget which is entitled **Outreach/Mission** actually totals 214,345. So it would be closer to the truth to say we immediately give 15% of our budget to causes beyond the local church.

But don't stop there. Where do you draw a line for ministry and mission? *Section I* deals with Nurture/Training/Fellowship, including Sunday School, Bible Study, and fellowship meals. *Section III* is "Witness/Worship" with spiritual formation, church development, and music. *Section IV* covers the church staff and the variety of ministries each person represents. *Sections V and VI* represent the least exciting parts of the budget—dealing with "Church Operating Expenses" and "Facilities Operations." However, these line items provide us tools for ministry. I think you can make a strong case that 100% of the budget supports our **mission statement** of "*making disciples of Jesus Christ through worship, education, fellowship, and service.*"

Financial consultants talk about the concept of **leverage**—the use of a small investment to gain a high return on one's money. When we financially support the church, we multiply our investment with eternal dividends.

- ❖ 300 average attendance in Sunday School
- ❖ 600 average attendance in worship
- ❖ 100s in Bible Study
- ❖ 350 at Wednesday night supper and activities
- ❖ Children's Ministries, including Puppets, PUMP, Vacation Bible School
- ❖ Assist children go to Camp Glisson each summer
- ❖ Youth Ministry
- ❖ Stephen's Ministry and other forms of pastoral care

- ❖ Local Missions: Bartow Resources, Children’s Shelter, Homeless Shelter, Women’s Emergency Shelter, Meals on Wheels, Action Ministries, and Bartow Christmas
- ❖ Domestic and foreign mission trips
- ❖ The development of new United Methodist congregations
- ❖ Choirs for all ages
- ❖ Outreach to potential visitors and guests who attend Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church
- ❖ A first class ministry facility
- ❖ Trained, dedicated staff that support various areas of the church’s ministry

And the list goes on. Perhaps we could do a few of these things on our own; but together we are able to accomplish so much more. Your financial faithfulness makes these things possible.

A father was going to the store to pick up a few things. When he asked if anyone needed anything else, his young daughter looked up from her coloring book and said: “Daddy, buy me something that will last FOREVER!”

That’s a pretty tall order. Most of our purchases will only last a few years. However, investments in God’s work last forever. Investing wisely requires us to wisely discern the temporal from the eternal and the passing from the everlasting.

***IV. The Easy Mark**

* *“The Easy Mark” adapted with permission from a sermon by the Rev. Mike Selleck.*

I grew up hearing my grandmother talk about “*the Great Depression.*” Like World Wars, I’m afraid we need to start numbering depressions, too. But during the FIRST Great Depression of the 1920s and 1930s, a number of people were out of work. A group of vagrants arose called “**hobos**” (HOpping BOxcars). They traveled from town-to-town, seeking food, shelter, or a job. Oftentimes, they carried all their belongings in a dirty bandana on the end of a stick.

Reactions to hobos varied. Many families feared and rejected away. Others simply ignored their existence. Some welcomed them with a hot meal and maybe a chance to clean up with a hose out back.

Leon Ray Livingston (1876-1944) was one of the most famous hobos of his day, traveling under the name of “A No. 1.” The “*King of the Hobos*” perfected the **symbols system** which advised other hobos about opportunities and dangers. For example:

- ✓ A square missing the top line signified “safe to camp here.”
- ✓ A top hat and triangle meant “wealth.”
- ✓ A wavy line above an X meant “fresh water and campsite.”
- ✓ Three diagonal lines warned “not a safe place.”
- ✓ A cross meant “angel food” or food served after the householders had eaten.

At homes where hospitality and welcome were extended, hobos left what they called an “**easy mark**” on the curb. Other vagrants knew it was a safe place where they would be welcomed.

Bob Winstead tells about his Aunt Minnie who was one of those kindly souls who always made others feel welcome during the Great Depression. She didn’t have much, but she shared what she had. Aunt Minnie’s home had a hobo “easy mark” out front, AND she knew it. Some might have resented being considered a soft touch, but she wore the title as a badge of honor. It allowed her to share God’s love with others less fortunate.

Far from retreating into selfishness and fear, Aunt Minnie saw the financial crisis as an opportunity to do more for God and neighbor. Like the widow giving her mite at the temple, Minnie willingly shared all that she possessed. And whenever the mark in front of her home began to fade, she would sneak out at night and re-chalk the “easy mark.”

Conclusion

An old adage known as “*The Chinese Curse*” declares: “*May you live in interesting times!*” We do indeed live in interesting times. But it seems to me that WE decide if this era is a curse or a blessing. The times in which we live present both challenge and opportunity. To paraphrase a verse from the Old Testament book of Esther, perhaps the Lord has put us in this place “*for such a time as this.*” This is the only time and place that we can serve God and neighbor.

During this time of renewed focus upon stewardship, we have the opportunity to re-mark the curbs of our church with the “**easy mark**” of Christian hospitality and God’s saving power. You can help us make that mark as you prayerfully consider your financial faithfulness to the church during the coming week.

It’s a scary ride, but it’s also a thrilling one. Years from now future generations may well look back to this time as the moment when God’s people arose with the power and authority of the Holy Spirit. We are more than conquerors in the name of Jesus Christ. Let us respond with faith and faithfulness to God’s call in this time and place.