

# Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

November 14, 2010    Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost  
Pledge Sunday

Matthew 6:

## **Lanyards for the Lord**

In the church, stewardship is the word we use mostly around this time of year when we are doing our financial planning for the coming year – which involves assessing our income and our expenses – hoping for a 0 balance. As a church / non-profit we're not in the business of amassing great wealth and with limited sources of income, we cannot operate in the red (with more going out than coming in).

All of this though is the stuff of balancing a budget – not stewardship. Balancing the budget is important certainly, and we have many competent people here whose volunteer efforts focus on managing our finances.

Stewardship, however, is something else.

A steward is someone who manages a property that is owned by another. When I hear the word “steward” I think of a wine steward – the person who cares for a restaurant's wine collection.

Christians / church people are also stewards. We manage something – many things actually – that are owned by someone else.

Let's look at the big picture. According to the Bible, the whole universe belongs to God. Psalm 24 says, “The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.” This is not an exaggeration or some parable – this is literally true; the earth belongs to God. After all, God made it. It is not ours to wreck or destroy; God has put us here to manage it because we aren't the owners.

In the smaller picture, this means a Christian lives as if all private property is really a gift from God. Since it belongs to God, take good care of it and feel free to share it with God and others. After all, it isn't really yours.

Stewardship is believing that everything you own actually belongs to God.

Steward comes from the Greek word, “oikos”, which means house. Stewardship is taking care of household matters. A related word is “oikonomics” from which we get the word “economics.” Stewardship is taking care of money matters that God has entrusted to us.

Still another related word is “oicology” from which we get the word “ecology.” Stewardship is taking care of the earth that God has entrusted to us.

And so we give according to what God has entrusted to us. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says,

From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded. (14:28)

And so a biblical understanding of giving doesn't ask, "how much does the church need?" but rather, "how much is God asking me to give?"

The story goes about a beggar by the roadside who asked for alms – a handout - from Alexander the Great as he passed by. The man was poor and wretched and had no claim upon the ruler, no right even to lift a solicitous hand. Yet the Emperor threw him several gold coins. A courtier was astonished at his generosity and commented, "Sir, copper coins would adequately meet a beggar's need. Why give him gold?" Alexander responded, "Copper coins would suit the beggar's need, but gold coins suit Alexander's giving."

Now Alexander the Great was not a Christian, (he died hundreds of years before Jesus was born,) but this story demonstrates what Jesus said in Luke – that to whom much is given, much is required.

And Christian stewardship is based on the fact that "much has been given" to us. This is so true. And you hear me say it every week when we take the offering – what we give to the church is our thank you for what God has first given us.

Can we ever thank God enough for not only material things – but for the giving of his Son for us? Probably not.

I want to share with you a favorite poem of mine, which gets at this notion of receiving much and what we offer in return. It's by Billy Collins, who is a professor at Lehman College in NY and was the Poet Laureate of the US from 2001 – 2003.

### The Lanyard

The other day I was ricocheting slowly  
off the blue walls of this room,  
moving as if underwater from typewriter to piano,  
from bookshelf to an envelope lying on the floor,  
when I found myself in the L section of the dictionary  
where my eyes fell upon the word lanyard.

No cookie nibbled by a French novelist  
could send one into the past more suddenly—  
a past where I sat at a workbench at a camp  
by a deep Adirondack lake  
learning how to braid long thin plastic strips  
into a lanyard, a gift for my mother.

I had never seen anyone use a lanyard  
or wear one, if that's what you did with them,  
but that did not keep me from crossing  
strand over strand again and again  
until I had made a boxy  
red and white lanyard for my mother.

She gave me life and milk from her breasts,  
and I gave her a lanyard.  
She nursed me in many a sick room,  
lifted spoons of medicine to my lips,  
laid cold face-cloths on my forehead,  
and then led me out into the airy light

and taught me to walk and swim,  
and I, in turn, presented her with a lanyard.  
Here are thousands of meals, she said,  
and here is clothing and a good education.  
And here is your lanyard, I replied,  
which I made with a little help from a counselor.

Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,  
strong legs, bones and teeth,  
and two clear eyes to read the world, she whispered,  
and here, I said, is the lanyard I made at camp.  
And here, I wish to say to her now,  
is a smaller gift—not the worn truth

that you can never repay your mother,  
but the rueful admission that when she took  
the two-tone lanyard from my hand,  
I was as sure as a boy could be  
that this useless, worthless thing I wove  
out of boredom would be enough to make us even.

I like this poem as a stewardship poem because from a Christian perspective it gets it right in a big way. It also gets it wrong – specifically in the last line – that the giving of the lanyard would be enough to make us even. In our relationship with God, we are never even; and there is always be the sense that there’s always something more we can do or give.

But it gets it right in a “Psalm 24” kind of way, in that what we offer in response to what God has done for us is so small, and yet we give it anyway. The point is what is in our hearts in the giving. Billy Collins never could have made the lanyard for his mother had she not given him life and love, what any mother would do for their child.

Similarly, we give our lanyards to God because of the relationship we have with God, not because we’re counting and keeping track of what He’s done for us, or what the church has done for us, but because God has made us and loves us beyond what words could say.

And we know God’s love primarily through the church. Through the relationships here which are based in Christ. As we pray for one another, or deliver meals when someone is recovering, or receive an encouraging word or a listening ear. What if we understood ourselves to be stewards not just of the material goods we have, but of the love of God as well....

One more story about the blessings of being generous:

In the early 1900's there were once two young men working their way through Stanford University. Their funds had gotten desperately low, and one of them got the idea to invite the famous pianist Paderewski to play a piano recital and use the profits for their tuition and board.

The great pianist's manager asked for a guarantee of two thousand dollars. The students, undaunted, proceeded to stage the concert. They worked hard, only to find that the concert had raised only sixteen hundred dollars. After the concert, the students went to Paderewski and told him of their efforts and results.

They gave him the entire sixteen hundred dollars, and accompanied it with a promissory note for four hundred dollars, explaining that they would earn the amount at the earliest possible moment and send the money to him.

"No," replied Paderewski, "that won't do." Then tearing the note to shreds, he returned the money and said to them: "Now, take out of this sixteen hundred dollars all of your expenses, and keep for each of you 10 percent of the balance for your work, and let me have the rest."

Well the years rolled by – and much had changed in the world. It was WWI and Paderewski was the head of the Polish National Committee in Paris (later he would become Prime Minister of Poland.) During the war, Paderewski lead relief agencies based in London and elsewhere as he sought to feed the starving thousands of his beloved Poland. He relied on his political and social contacts around the world to obtain thousands of tons of food which poured into Poland during these devastating years.

After the starving people were fed, Paderewski journeyed to Paris to thank Herbert Hoover for the relief he had sent him. "Of course, Mr. Paderewski," was Mr. Hoover's reply. "Besides, you don't remember it, but you helped me once when I was a student at college and I was in need."

Again, I don't know that Paderewski and Hoover were Christians. It doesn't really matter.

What matters is that we are Christians and that this is our church. Here's another definition of stewardship:

Stewardship is everything you do after you say 'yes' to Jesus.

We don't really know what will become of our offerings here – sure the bills will be paid, supplies will be purchased, staff will receive salaries – but the point is that great things will grow from these ordinary acts in ways we can't even imagine.

And so like Billy Collins, we go to camp or to work, and we make our lanyards, and we offer them to the Lord. Sure that at the same time it is not enough and yet somehow it is enough.  
Amen.