

A Community Alive: Rooted and Reaching

Commitment Sunday; Worship at Work Sunday

Some people would say—*you* might be saying!—that combining a Worship at Work Sunday—a day we focus on service rather than our traditional worship service—with Commitment Sunday—the day we bring and bless our financial pledges to the church for next year—is a crazy thing.

And it might be. But you're here. We're here. There is a sense today—I can feel it—that we are doing something new together. Something that is both rooted in the long and deep commitment of this church to being the people of God in this place, and something that is reaching for a *new* way of understanding what that means.

That is the work of this church. It is the work of this time. To be a community—a tree—*alive*. Which means, by definition: growing, changing, shedding old leaves, even dying in some ways; so that something new can come.

I'm not sure I can tell you what we are growing into. God's vision comes to us a little like a Polaroid picture: fuzzy and unclear at first, only gradually coming into focus. We just keep taking a step forward, toward what we *can* see, every time the invitation comes. If we are faithful, and courageous, and trusting, what emerges will be something that surprises us...and blesses the world. And almost certainly, it will be something that stretches us beyond what we thought we could do.

In a moment, you will be invited to bring to this basket at the front your pledge card—and if not a pledge, then an offering, or perhaps just your attendance card. Whatever it is in your hand, I trust it will hold your prayers and your hopes for this church—for *your* community of faith—to be all that God needs and hopes for it to be.

But let me say a word first about pledging. We do this every year. If you've been around the church a long time, you know that every year someone asks you to give more to the church next year than you gave the year before. And it would not surprise me—because this is often my feeling too—if you say to yourself, “Yeah, I get it that the church needs more money, but that request isn't for me. I already give what I can.” And for most of us, that means: I give what I can give without noticing that money is gone; without it making a difference in my lifestyle. I need the money I have, the money I earn; giving money away—even to the church—is a nice thing, but my real responsibility is to make sure I have enough for what I need, for what my family needs.

In the Old Testament book of Malachi, God says, “Test me.” The people in Malachi's time lived in what biblical historians call “the days of small things.” They had limited hope, pared-down expectations of God, and of themselves. They had stopped stretching, growing. It wasn't good, but it seemed to them like enough. And then God said to them, Test me. Bring a whole tithe—ten percent of everything—to the storehouse where gifts are kept. And see if I don't open up heaven itself to you and pour out blessings beyond your wildest dreams. (Malachi 3:10)

That's the promise I want to claim. For you. for this church. For the world we are called to love and serve. God's blessings beyond our wildest dreams.

But those blessings don't come automatically. They come when we take a step toward something we cannot see. That next risky step that requires trusting something just a little bit out of our control, our planning, our calculations about what is enough.

I want us to live in the days of great things—not small things. So this morning I'm asking you—right now—to take out your pledge card if you've brought one, or take one from the pew reach in front of you. If yours is in a sealed envelope already, tear it open. Look at the number you've written down. If it's a 'safe' number, if what you are inclined to give to the church's work in 2017 is what you can give without feeling it much, then I want to ask you to think for a moment about crossing it out and stretching a little more. Stretching for a vision of life that has not fully come into focus yet.

Do you trust that God can do something beyond your wildest dreams? You don't get to that blessing by holding on, our God says; you reach for it by being faithful; by giving yourself away.

Because I'm asking you to do this, I'm doing it myself—right now. I'm changing the number on my pledge card to something that feels a little risky, more than I can 'safely' give. It's a little scary. I'm testing God's promise that there will be enough for what I need. And maybe—maybe—there will be even more than what I need. Will you join me?

Prayer

You, God, maker of life, understander of life, giver of new life—

You are the God of all our possibilities.
You watch over all our comings and goings,
 all our wealth and our poverty,
 all our sickness and health,
 all our despair and hope,
 all our living and all our dying.
And we are grateful.

You are God of all our impossibilities too.
You have not forgotten the parts of our lives that we imagine are already closed.

Have we given you enough of ourselves to work with, to do something miraculous, to heal us?
Can you use us to heal others and mend this world at its torn and broken places?

This is what we want, what we pray for, as we lift the names and see the faces of those who are in our hearts and our prayers on this day.
Let us be faithful to them, and to you.

Give us the trust we need to put our lives, and the lives of those we love, and the life of this world you love, in your strong hands—your hands that are big enough to hold all our possibilities *and* our impossibilities.

Make all things new—even us—we pray in the new-making name of Jesus whom we call the Christ, and with the words he taught us to pray together: Our Father...