

Seeds of Hope: Reflections on Stewardship
A Sermon by Beverly A. Zell
Given at Hope Church, RCA, Holland, Michigan

The world was a different place when Gordon called several months ago asking me to preach a stewardship sermon. Back then, there were no storm clouds on the horizon, the skies were blue, flowers were blooming, the stock market was strong and most of us felt at least somewhat secure about the future. If I had known then, what I know now, I might have declined the invitation.

Stewardship can be a hard subject to talk about, particularly in times like these when the future is filled with uncertainty. It's hard to make promises to the church when we are worried about job security, mortgage payments, tuition, retirement or simply how to make ends meet. Given all that, it is tempting to steer clear of too much talk about money. In times like these we come to worship seeking hope and solace and not the sometimes hard lessons of stewardship.

Yet despite all our concerns about the volatility of today's economy and what it means for us and our community, we can not avoid the subject of giving. As Christians, it's impossible for us to separate our spiritual life from our economic life. If we understand ourselves to be stewards of the resources that God has given us, then stewardship becomes not only an expression of our faith, but a means by which we grow in faith.

In this morning's gospel reading, we find a difficult story about giving. Jesus is in the Temple, watching people place their offerings in the treasury. He notices that many rich people put in large sums of money. But the person Jesus lifts up as an example of generosity is a poor widow who gives a penny's worth.

He tells his disciples that her small gift is greater than all the others because proportionately her gift is more generous. The rich people in the story put in much larger sums of money, but they kept a lot too. Unlike the widow, they would never miss what they gave. But the woman gave it all; she gave like God gives, with extravagance.

Sometimes this passage is used to support a "give until it hurts" theology of stewardship. I don't think that is the point here. Jesus doesn't vilify the contributions of the rich nor does he encourage us to give irresponsibly. He simply makes a point about what it means to be truly generous.

I loved this story as a child in Sunday School. Perhaps it is because I grew up on the economic margins of society. I knew from first-hand experience how precious two small coins can be. What impressed me then—and now—about this story is the depth of the woman's generosity and simple trust.

Have you ever known anyone like that—someone with such an open heart and generous spirit that they give extravagantly of themselves and their resources? I'm guessing that some of you fit that description. As a newcomer—and a minister—I listen closely to the way you talk about Hope Church when you welcome a stranger. Many of you begin by describing this church's commitment to missions and outreach, the Seeds of Hope that you celebrate during this stewardship campaign.

You mention the people served through the Community Action House and The Community Kitchen; the children mentored through your partnership with Kids Hope; the homes created for families through Habitat and the Tenth Street House; and clean water provided to poor communities in Mexico. You know the list better than I do. Some call it love in action. In the church we call it stewardship, sharing from our abundance to give hope to others.

The story of the widow is familiar to many of us. It comes from an ancient time and place and sometimes that allows us to keep it at a distance. So let me also share with you the story of contemporary woman who like the widow was an extravagant giver.

Her name was Oseola McCarty, "Ossie" to her friends. Some of you may remember hearing about her. She made her living doing laundry and ironing out of her home, charging only a few dollars for each bundle.

As a child she dreamed of becoming a nurse. But in the sixth grade she was forced to quit school to care for a sick relative. She never married. She lived frugally and saved most of the money she earned.

In 1995, Miss McCarty, knowing she didn't have long to live, gave her entire life savings away. She set aside a small portion for her church and her family, but the bulk of it—totaling \$150,000—she gave to strangers at the University of Southern Mississippi. She asked that the money be used for scholarships, seeds of hope that would enable someone else to live their dreams.

In the annals of philanthropy her gift didn't amount to much, but her extravagant generosity captivated the world. People from all over the country made donations that boosted that scholarship fund by more than \$300,000. She was honored by the United Nations, invited to the White House and received more than 300 awards, including an honorary degree from Harvard University.

When queried by a reporter about why she didn't spend the money on herself, she said there was nothing in particular I wanted to buy. There was no place I really wanted to visit so I decided to help someone else so they wouldn't have to work as hard as I did.

Isn't it amazing to think that an elderly laundry woman who never graduated high school could teach the rest of the world so much about giving—and living?

How do we become that kind of person? How do those of us who live with such abundance, learn to give so extravagantly? Perhaps it begins by learning how to live with less. These two women possessed something a friend of mine calls “the theology of enough.”

Let me explain that a bit. We live in a society that relentlessly pressures us to acquire, amass and accumulate. According to American Demographics magazine 3,000 advertising images are coming at our children each day. By the time they are 21 they have experienced 23 million advertising impressions. Is it any wonder that it’s so radical for us to believe that we have everything we need?

The stories of these two women remind us that each of us faces a choice in life. Do we want to be with those who take more than they give or with those who give back more than they take from life?

I know what I want. I also know I’m not there yet. In fact, I have a long, long way to go. I’ve come to think of it as a journey. I see the intersection of my spiritual and economic life as a place where I need to grow in my faith. These days I am asking myself what it truly means to be a steward of all that God has given me. Not just the percentage that I give away, but also the portion that I keep.

Gary and I are not members of Hope Church. We are listed among its “friends.” This week, like all of you, we expect to receive an invitation in the mail, asking us to support the mission of this church. We intend to respond again this year by pledging a percentage of our income.

We do it because at this time in our lives, it is here among all of you that our faith is nurtured in creative and meaningful worship. We do it because we see this church teaching the next generation of Christians about God’s radically inclusive and extravagant love. And we do it because we see that love expressed in your commitment to this church, to this community and to the world.

Each of us must make our own decision about what we will give and what we will keep. As we do, let us remember that it’s not simply about our economic life. It’s also about our spiritual life. And whether the gift is large or small, every gift and every giver is extravagantly loved and valued by God from whom all things come. Amen.