

## **Abundant Possibilities**

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### *Malachi 3:6-12 and Matthew 6: 19-21*

Well friends, this is it. This is the Sunday of the dreaded Stewardship Sermon. And I want to let you in a secret. Booorrning. Uncomfortable. Do we have to talk about it? It's like "the talk" we have with our pre-pubescent children, you know which talk I mean, and yes. We have to talk about money.

And I've decided that, for me, it's time to start telling the truth about money. I'm starting with confession. And this is my confession. I have been robbing God. Our Malachi scripture this morning says that if we don't give God's share of tithes and offering to the church we are robbing God. This is me. The problem is that I love going to restaurants and buying granddaughter Evie pretty little dresses. I look forward with eager anticipation to going to the symphony and the Lyric opera. I want to travel everywhere in the world and not worry about what the plane ticket costs or how much money we spend. I want to be able to look at our retirement account and not worry about the future. I would love to have cable TV and Tivo and I particularly would like to own an I-Pad and a Blackberry. It's painful for me to give money away. It hurts when Paul writes checks to his favorite philanthropies. That's money that I would LOVE to spend in other ways. And this is part of my confession. Sometimes I do spend money on myself. Friday is my day off and a friend and I have series tickets for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Paul and I go out to dinner A LOT on Friday nights. I do like manicures and pedicures although I haven't had much time recently to do that. But, and this is a big but for me, I have finally figured out that I do not need to be a perfect, altruistic role model for God to use me in the ministry of money. We are all here, clergy and congregation, to work on each other, and telling the truth, being authentic is just the beginning.

Let's first address the fact that talking about money at all is uncomfortable. What I've noticed at St. Peter's, like many other churches, this church is not unique, is that there is a somewhat embarrassed fanfare around the offertory. We pass our offering plates somewhat apologetically as people try not to see what others have put in. The tradition in this church has been for the ushers to bring the offering plates forward during the doxology and then to scurry them away to a special, private counting room, which admit I have never seen, although this procedure has recently been changed. The pastors of this church have no idea how much individual parishioners give. When I have asked about this, I was told that that is because the church believes what people give is between them and God – it's private. I get the message that talking

aggressively about pledging and giving is taboo. And I know there is unspoken anxiety at St. Peter's about money. So far, this is not looking like a particularly good pledge campaign. The results are not terribly promising.

I take the blame for that upon myself. Wise mentors have told me that in many churches the congregation's issue with money can be traced to those of the pastor. Although I know that I've been pulled into a church culture that began long before I was even born, and it's a culture of not talking about money, I certainly could have been more assertive during the current financial stewardship campaign. I wish I had been - hence, today's sermon.

When it comes to anxiety around money, the church and this pastor (me) share something in common: our sin. We are all shaped by a world of greed and materialism, and, from deep within us the worst part of ourselves participates. So together we make a silent pact not to talk about money. Instead we spend time in church thinking about more pleasant things. As a church, we aren't ignoring money. We can't because we need it to survive. But we collect it and figuratively or literally wish it away from the altar as we get it out of sight and off our minds as fast as we can. I don't know about you, but somehow, to me, it feels almost unclean to talk about and think about money.

I've decided that as of this Sunday, I will work on changing this church's money culture. The clergy whom I admire most deal with money honestly as they acknowledge the complexity of dealing with the topic as well as their own brokenness. And I am broken. Although my husband Paul has been writing weekly checks to St. Peter's church since I started in August, I personally have yet to contribute one dime to this church.

This is changing as of today. I'm going public about money. Here goes. My base salary at St. Peter's Church is \$44,370 annually. In addition to that base salary I receive a \$36,000/year housing allowance as well as health benefits. My base salary and housing allowance added together come to \$80,370/year. I am announcing right now that as of this month and for the year 2012 I am going to tithe to St. Peter's Church. I will give 10% of my combined base salary and housing allowance which comes to an annual pledge of \$8,370.

I am not announcing this to boast. I'm announcing this because at heart I'm a cheapskate. To be honest, I have never tithed before. I'm committing myself to do so in public. In this way I'm making myself accountable to all of you. By announcing my commitment to pledge publicly, I can't back out when I'm once again tempted to get cable TV, buy myself an iPad, or go out for yet another Friday night dinner with Paul.

I'm also doing this because the Bible tells me to do this and it's something I need to do as your Senior Pastor. How can I ask all of you to dig deep if I'm not willing to dig deep myself? I've tried doing that in other churches I've served and the disconnect for me is horrible. I have felt like a complete fake, a thorough charlatan!

I'm also doing this because I've been advised to do this. In his book *Not Your Parents Offering Plate*, author J. Clif Christopher says to clergy, "You must testify to lead. It is imperative for every pastor." He goes on to say, "I am aware of the scriptures admonishing us to go into the closet to pray and not to air our good deeds for all to hear, but I fear these passages are used more to help (clergy) escape leadership than to keep us humble. Jesus calls us to lead and set an example, and to not do so would be clergy malpractice...financial stewardship in your church cannot be seriously improved without the active and faithful leadership of you, the pastor."

Before I go any further, I want to acknowledge that I know many of you cannot afford to tithe or even give to the church. I understand. I want to be extremely clear that all are welcome here at St. Peter's Church at any time for any function, including the upcoming adult mission trip, despite the inability to financially contribute at this time. When I am only giving up cable TV and an iPhone, it's relatively easy for me to tithe. I know very well that some people sitting here today are regular guests of the Walk-In Ministry and the IC and Yorkville food pantries. I well remember the year that my husband Paul and I came back from a family vacation with our three children only to have Paul come go into work the Monday we got back to be told that his services with that company would no longer be needed – in other words they let him go while we were on vacation. That was the year I went to the public library and checked out library books and wrapped them for Christmas presents for our children. I really do understand what it's like to have NO money. I implore you to feed your children first, pay your bills, and keep your house warm and dry. After all that is done, you can once again give to St. Peter's Church.

I am asking for money for the ministry of St. Peter's from those of you with the ability to give. I attended an Illinois Conference meeting with Russ Weigand on Thursday of this week. He was at the meeting in a place of honor because of his experience as a fund raiser. Russ had three important pieces of wisdom to share with the gathered group. He told us in no uncertain terms, "People want to give. Philanthropy is important to them. But we have to ask for money!" So I am asking. Please consider pledging for the first time to St. Peter's Church or please consider raising your current pledge by a considerable amount for the coming year. I urge you to pick up a new pledge card if you've already sent your pledge in. In big letters across the top write "REVISED" and drop it in the wooden church in the lobby. I guarantee you that Jan in the office will be more than happy to revise her records and update your pledge.

As I appeal to your higher selves by asking for money, I want to share with you an important statistic. You may not know that the average household income in Elmhurst, IL is \$108,116. You are more than welcome to read the Mission Insite report from which I'm getting this data. As clergy we often find ourselves living in economic disconnect with our neighbors and parishioners. Sometimes clergy are the poorest members in a wealthy community, allowed to live there geographically by virtue of their position, but not really able to live like others. Clergy children may associate with the wealthy, but often they cannot afford to go on the same ski trips, drive the same cars, or attend the same colleges that many of their friends do. Clergy may be taken as guests to restaurants they could never afford, or perhaps loaned the vacation homes of parishioners. In other words, they are in the community of wealth and privilege but not of it. This is a tricky place from which to proclaim good news to the poor.

I'm suggesting that it is important for this congregation to be able to offer the next Senior Pastor at least a salary of \$108,116, the average household income in Elmhurst. That is almost \$28,000 more than I am currently being paid if you put my base salary and housing allowance together or almost an additional \$63,000 if you look at my base salary alone. Don't get me wrong! I am not petitioning for a raise for myself. When I accepted this job in August I was fully aware of what I was going to be paid and I'm fine with that. But I am suggesting that in all fairness to the next Sr. Pastor he or she needs to be compensated in a way that is commensurate with the Elmhurst community. And that will mean a significant increase in next year's budget. And this says nothing about increasing mission giving and other things that are important to this congregation.

As food for thought, I will leave the last words on this topic of money to our dear friend Jesus. To reiterate what was read earlier, Jesus says, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." I implore you to examine where your heart is. As we work together to build God's Kingdom here on earth, I ask you, is your heart here with your dear friends and loved ones at St. Peter's Church or is your heart somewhere else? For where your treasure is, your heart will be also.

Amen.