

One of the reasons I love this community so much is how we care for one another when we are hurting.

The way you stood vigil as Alice lay dying was truly beautiful. A sacred passage from life unto death ... with a trust that in some mysterious way we will also know life beyond death ...

And so it is fitting ... perhaps ... to be preaching about the experience of ‘loss’ even as we find ourselves in the middle of a Stewardship Season of ‘Celebrating God’s *Abundance!*’

As Providence would have it, in the two Sundays before our Stewardship Season officially began, we encountered in our Scriptures a rich man approaching Jesus, asking, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

And so I invited us to imagine together what it might mean for us at First United to do just as Jesus recommends: to sell off everything we might think we depend on. The endowment, the building and the property, the organ.

And to see what the Spirit might have to teach us in their place.

It was not my intent to make us gasp in horror, although that might have been a legitimate response. It *was* my intent to prepare us spiritually for the lesson of the Book of Job that came before us the next Sunday, about a man who did not have the *choice* to sell his possessions like the rich man in the Gospel of Mark did. Who instead lost it all in one great tragic moment through absolutely no fault of his own.

It was my intent on both Sundays, in preparation for this Season of Stewardship of Celebrating God’s Abundance, to start by instilling within us a heart of compassion for anyone in our midst who may have also lost it all. Who may have nowhere else to turn. Who might even one day be our very selves.

In spite of our careful planning or our great education or our fabulous family. Because Job had all of that, too. But he had to learn the hard way that he could not place his faith in those things.

It was also my intent on both Sundays, in preparation for this Season of Celebrating God’s Abundance, to instill in us a heart of compassion for our Job-like neighbors here in our own neighborhood. Who have every right to feast at the same table of grace that we do once a month. Who may, in fact, have a thing or two to teach *us* about the grace of God.

And it has been my bottom line intent, in all of this preaching and teaching and singing and praying in this Season of Stewardship, that we might encounter for just a brief moment—in the shuddering thought of losing it all—the depth of divine grace that really has been with us from the dawn of creation. Just because we *exist*. Just because *God* exists. And will not ever let us go. Not ever.

This is, of course, what Job learned when we encountered him in the whirlwind two Sundays ago. And this is what I think he tries to convey to his family and friends *this* Sunday, as we return to the very last chapter of his Book and discover that he gets it all back in the end.

In double portion.

Now before I go any further I should warn us that we could read the first two chapters of Job and the last chapter of Job and learn the exact opposite lesson of what the book is trying to teach. We could think that the point of the book is that we should suffer patiently through trial and tribulation. Never questioning God. Believing God will give us back what we think we “deserve” *materially* in the end.

That isn't the point of the book at all!

Job has not *forgotten* everything that happens in between the second chapter and the forty-second chapter. And neither has God.

The supposedly happy ending only comes *after* Job has defiantly declared his innocence, wept in despair, shaken his fist at God in fierce anger and frustration, and learned the hard way that it's not “all about him.” The happy ending only comes after Job is *transformed* by what he has endured!

He has learned the gift of compassion for *anyone else* going through what he has gone through. He has learned the gift of praying for the very same friends who had patronized him so profusely with their self-righteous spirituality and utter *lack* of compassion for him. And he has learned to pay attention to those in his midst who never had a hope for the kind of great wealth—the kind of great *inheritance*—he had taken for granted all along. Meaning his daughters. Whom he acknowledges by name:

Jemimah . . . meaning “with God.”

Keziah . . . meaning “God's fragrance.”

Keren-happuch . . . meaning, loosely translated, “the beautifier.”

It may not seem like a big deal to us in the 21st century United States of America for a man like Job to pass on his inheritance to his daughters as well as his sons. But it is a *huge* deal for the Bible! It only happens one other time that I am aware of, in the Book of Numbers, from a father who has no sons to claim his inheritance and needs to keep his land “in the family.”

But here in Job sharing the inheritance with his daughters is not about carrying on the family name. He has enough sons for that. Sharing the inheritance with his daughters is about *justice*. It is about the fact that Job has learned through his own brief dramatic loss what his daughters have been experiencing *all along*. Without an inheritance of their own. Without a name of their own. Completely dependent on the whims of the powerful for their own fortune or famine. Job's experience of learning he cannot depend on his wealth to save him has heightened his sensitivity toward *others* who never had wealth of their own in the first place.

This is what I think Jesus was hoping the rich man in Mark's Gospel would learn, too, by giving it all away on purpose. This is what I think God might be asking *us* to re-learn in this intentional Season of Stewardship of Celebrating God's Abundance, here at First United.

Who in our midst is like the daughters of Job? In need of an inheritance that doesn't just come naturally by cultural imperative. With whom might God be inviting us at First United to share our great inheritance? The ones who wouldn't get any inheritance otherwise?

We only have to look as far as the Oakwood Community Center for an answer.

It originated, as we know, as a Presbyterian congregation with an intentional commitment to interracial worship and economic justice in a diverse neighborhood. But it lacked the same kind of inheritance – in the form of a generous endowment – that has kept congregations like First United afloat.

When the congregation ceased to exist as a worshiping community, the building became a Community Center. And now they host an even more racially and economically diverse worshiping community than they ever did before. And more people are fed through the Soul Café dinners than ever before. And more children are encouraged through the community art programs than ever before.

The Oakwood Community Center has maintained significant funding from the Albany Presbytery for this transition. But that funding will phase out, and there are no guarantees for how it will be replaced.

Now we at First United truly are already incredibly generous in our mission giving across the board. We already have a commitment to giving 20% of our annual income from our endowment away to mission projects. In 2015, that amounted to \$14,000 of support for various ministries in Troy and beyond. But may I suggest increasing our financial support for the Oakwood Community Center is a *perfect* way to pass on the Madison Square inheritance? At least according to the Book of Job.

What if we decided that in 2016 we would give another 10% of our endowment revenue specifically to the Oakwood Community Center? That would mean we would either have to reduce our expenses or raise additional money from our own giving to offset roughly \$7000.

But I think we could do it!

I'll even take it one step further. What if—just asking what *if*—First United Presbyterian Church set a goal within the next ten years to give away *all* of the inheritance that comes to this congregation? That instead of using our inheritance to pay our own bills, we give it away to those who have no other hope for an inheritance? Like Job's daughters.

I haven't run this by the session or the finance committee. And even if they agree with this line of thinking, we may not be able to pull it off in 2016. But I'm willing to take the first step myself. I have decided to increase my own pledge by 20% this year and I am hoping you will join me.

Imagine what kind of stewardship of God's grace this congregation could offer if every dime of the church's operating expenses came from the pledges *within* this worshiping community and every dime of our inheritance went directly to mission?

I think it could happen! I *know* it can happen! I am convinced there is an enormous wealth of untapped talent and time and treasure in this congregation just waiting for a chance to break forth for the good of God! It may require us to spend a little less in other areas of our lives. Skip our Starbucks once in a while for the sake of the kingdom of God. But wouldn't it feel fabulous! For us and for God?

Just think about it. We, too, could be like Job. Transformed by God's grace. Blessed beyond measure. In order to *be* a blessing beyond measure. And shouting Alleluia for the inheritance we get to pass on.

Just think about it.

Amen.