

“Telling Our Stories, Sharing Our Gifts”

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Third Presbyterian Church

November 18, 2018 (Stewardship Sunday)

I Samuel 1:4-20; 2:1-10

Let me add my words of gratitude to Katie Orem’s. Thank you, in advance, for your pledges, which we will present in just a few moments as we sing together a wonderful old hymn. We have made the case by telling stories and by sharing figures. I believe the investment is worth it, that our story, this story, *the* story, is worth telling, needs to be told, and that we would be doing a disservice to it and ourselves if we undersold it, if we didn’t stretch ourselves, if we didn’t embrace a vision of abundance. So thank you.

Somewhere in the bulletin there is a little box, with the stewardship logo and a few blank lines. Let’s take a moment to reflect and respond to those questions...“I have been given the gift of...” and “I share that gift by...” The point is considering your gifts, and sharing them, alongside the financial gifts we are all called to share this morning. Perhaps your gift is compassion, and you share it by caring for others. Perhaps your gift is discernment, and you share it by serving on a committee. Perhaps your gift is perseverance, and you share it by showing up and doing whatever work is needed to be done. You have a gift. Actually, you have many gifts, and we have many more gifts, together, that we are called to share.

Two weeks ago, yesterday, it was a beautiful day. By beautiful I mean that it was raining and about 44 degrees and very gray. Yet it was gorgeous, because it was East Avenue Grocery Run day. I have told you the results – more than 1200 participants, more than 100 volunteers, more than \$44,000 raised. Thanks again to the leadership team and to all of you for making it happen.

I participate every year. I run a little and walk a lot. This year I wore my new Pittsburgh Pirates hat because I walked with the Tree of Life synagogue heavily on my heart. I wore shorts, which I do, and people kept asking me if I was cold. Why yes, yes I was cold. But I was determined.

At mile one, I heard the music playing. Bruce Springsteen. "Born to Run." I hated to disagree with Bruce, but at that moment I did not particularly feel that I was born to run. Nevertheless, I persisted.

At mile two, our own Dan Taylor was playing the music. U2. Another favorite. And it was as if Bono was singing to me... "Oh you look so beautiful..." Drenched in rain, needing a thousand Kleenex, my glasses fogged up so I took them off, a futile quest for visibility. And I persisted, knowing by then that the fastest runners were already finished. "Oh you look so beautiful."

Mile three, a tenth of a mile to go. I turned the corner onto East Avenue and started jogging again, as if I had been doing it the whole time. I crossed the finish line, not a personal best but not a personal worst, my arms outstretched and reaching for the heavens, "Chariots of Fire" style. Can you guess the song that was playing when I crossed? Journey. "Don't Stop Believing." "Don't Stop Believing." I always hated that song. I hate it a little less now.

And I thought, in this Year of Stories, of my story at that moment. And I thought of the stories of all 1200 people running and walking, younger and older, some with the fleetest of feet and some not, some connected intimately with this congregation and some who would never dream of darkening the door of a church building. I then thought of all of the people, all the hungry people who our food cupboard and dining room ministry supports with the money raised. Telling Our Stories, Sharing Our Gifts.

The East Avenue Grocery Run is a stewardship story, a group of people getting together, identifying their gifts of organization and enthusiasm and persistence, sharing their gifts.

The same thing happens here, in this place, time after time, day after day, year after year, generation after generation. The Chancel Choir or the Junior Choir or a

bell choir, each member, identifying their gift and sharing it. Or our Sunday school teachers or youth advisors, doing the same. Or any of you, RAIHN volunteers this week, or tutors, or Deacons or Trustees or Elders.

Or this great staff, working hard, working together faithfully.

Given gifts by a generous and abundant God, all of us. No exception. Each of us must identify our motivation for sharing those gifts, but in no uncertain terms are we called to share them. Even when it's difficult. Even when we are unconvinced that they even exist, let alone their value.

That includes our money, of course. In terms of two weeks ago, I thought about how our financial gifts are multiplied, how the leadership team uses their gifts, and the walkers and runners use theirs, and the volunteers use theirs. How this building serves as its own kind of gift, both as host for the event itself and the place where we share food three days a week.

What this place is, this church, is a collection of stories and a gathering of gifts and a crucible of sharing. Each of us, with a story, a plotline, a narrative.

This morning we shared the story of Hannah, which may seem an odd stewardship story. Hannah loves God very much, and worships God faithfully, and is left, year after year after year, bitter and distressed because she is unable to bear a child. That is her story. That may be your story. Eli the priest sees her and has compassion for her. She bears a son, Samuel. That may be your story. It may not. I understand.

What we cannot make this about is a direct line between her faith and a welcome and unexpected birth, because that would undermine all the faith that went before it. What we can make it about is her faithfulness, period, her willingness to share her story in all its fullness, in good times and bad, and a family who loved her without condition and a faith community that had compassion for her.

She follows with what is called Hannah's prayer, but it is really a song, very much like Mary's song, the Magnificat, that she offers when she learns that she is pregnant.

Last Sunday, at the 9:30 hour, a group of you shared your stories, bravely and compellingly, in the context of our all abilities work, and the challenges and opportunities of diversity and inclusion. Some spoke of physical abilities, and the challenges of navigating this space. Some spoke of mental abilities, autism, PTSD. Telling our stories, sharing our gifts.

An hour later, another group shared their stories of military service, powerfully and poignantly, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Desert Storm and Shield, and times in between. Telling our stories, sharing our gifts.

And the beauty of the church, the particular beauty of this church, is that in the face of the forces to individualize and privatize, we show up here, to tell our stories, to hear the stories of others, to realize that interconnected and interwoven stories are infinitely more interesting and vastly more powerful, that the gospel message that has claimed our hearts and souls and that has called us to serve depends on a community of storytellers to tell it, to share it.

That it takes money to do so seems obvious to say, and almost crass, but it does. That's what today is about. Generosity of money is not the only chapter of our story, but it is a chapter. Our response.

Ann Michel writes that "In many churches, the conversation around money and giving relies heavily on the vocabulary of stewardship and tithing. Stewardship and tithing are, of course, important elements of a biblical theology of giving. But unfortunately, beyond a small audience of church insiders, few people today grasp the deeper meaning of these terms, which are grounded in antiquity. And too often they are heard as thinly veiled euphemisms for church fundraising or finger-wagging legalisms...I'm not suggesting that we abandon the concepts of stewardship...But I think they belong under the umbrella of a larger theological construct — the generosity of God. The good news is, our faith tells a wonderful, hopeful, inspiring story of a generous God who calls us to be generous.... Once we understand the generous nature of God and our call to participate in God's generosity, so many other parts of our faith story come into clearer focus."

That is our invitation. To tell our stories. To hear the stories of others. To connect our stories in this place that they might be magnified and multiplied in solidarity

and in service. “Don’t stop believing” in your story. Share your gifts abundantly and generously, because of our faith in a generous and abundant God. Amen.