

Last week, Pastor Neil had a wonderful introduction to the concept of what I would call “complete” stewardship, and as we begin our time together today, I’d like to review, and reinforce, several concepts from his message.

First, Neil suggested that stewardship is about worship, suggesting that every stewardship act is an act of worship. Second, he reminded us that God wants the first and best of our lives. “Stewardship,” he said, “can be described as ‘organizing your life so God can give you away.’”

Neil went on to say that stewardship is about more than money – it’s also about our relationship to the earth, how we use our time and gifts, even, and perhaps most importantly, how we share the gospel – the “good news.” But, the very next Sunday, we wheel out the assistant treasurer and ask him to talk about money. Sounds like an underhanded ploy. Actually, it’s coincidence. Neil is not available today, Tina is just getting back from some time away, and I had shared a sermon idea with pastoral staff in the fall. And besides, this Friday is the one day out of the year that is perhaps most associated with money in our society – April 15.

Rusty read Luke 7:36-8:3, a reasonably familiar story, with an additional few verses that may be less so. The title of my message is “Simon, The Woman, The Women, and The Other Women.” I feel a little like the guy on one of the Bob Newhart shows who would walk into the room with his two brothers and say, “I’m Larry. This is my brother Darrell, and my other brother Darrell.”

But I’m a firm believer in the power of a well-told story, so let’s look at the characters. First, there’s Simon. As a Pharisee, it’s likely that Simon was well-to-do. It was common that the houses of the well-to-do had a courtyard, and very possibly, that’s where they were eating.

When a guest entered such a house, common courtesy said the host should do three things. First, give the kiss of peace, a mark of respect that would never be omitted for a distinguished Rabbi. Second, pour cool water over the guests’ feet to cleanse and refresh them. And finally, either a pinch of sweet-smelling incense was burned or a drop of rose oil was placed on the guests head.

Simon, based on what we read later, did none of these.

Next, the woman. In the New International Version, she’s a “woman who had lived a sinful life.” Peterson’s translation, *The Message*, puts it more bluntly. He calls her “the town harlot.” So what was she doing there? Well, when a Rabbi came to such a courtyard, it was common for others to come in and listen to the conversation. Folks reclined on low couches as they ate, so it would not have been uncommon to see someone in this place.

But doing what she was about to do? The picture is very vivid as Luke paints it. That the woman responds as she does suggests that this wasn’t the first time that she’s heard Jesus speak. As she listens, perhaps he repeated some of the words Luke recorded a chapter earlier, words like “Do not judge, and you will not be judged.” As she hears him speak, she begins to weep. Tears drip down from her face, on to the feet of Jesus.

Oh, no. What to do now, she wonders? She’s not the hostess, certainly not someone who would be prepared for such an occasion. But she needs to do something about these tears. She

responds the only way she can. Jewish women of that day never let their hair down in public – it was an act of gravest immodesty. But that’s what she did. She lets down her hair, and uses it to dry the feet of Jesus. Then, taking the alabaster jar of perfume that she wore around her neck, she poured perfume on to his feet.

Simon, apparently, was not impressed. The Bible says that he said to himself, “If he only knew what this woman was about, he’d have never associated with her.”

Jesus responds differently, “Simon,” he says. “I have a story to tell you.” He then tells what we refer to as the Parable of the Two Debtors. It’s one of the more straightforward parables, and pretty easy to understand. One man owes a lender 500 bucks, another owes him 50. Neither can pay, and the lender forgives both debts. Which borrower will love the lender more? Pretty logical – the one who owed 500. Even Simon gets that one right.

Then, turning to the woman, but still speaking to Simon, Jesus offers an explanation. “Simon,” he Jesus says. “When I came here, you didn’t offer the barest of courtesies, but this woman, can’t stop. You didn’t kiss me on the head; she won’t stop kissing my feet. You didn’t wash my feet; she washed my feet with the only water she had, that of her tears. She dried my feet with the only towel she had, that of her hair. And you didn’t put oil on my head; she used the most expensive stuff she had, broke open the bottle and poured it on my feet.

“She was forgiven many, many sins, and she is very, very grateful.”

Then, looking directly at the woman, he said, “Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go. In Peace.”

Then we move to Chapter 8. I can understand why there is a chapter break at this point, but sometimes it’s helpful to read directly from one chapter to the next, and this was a blessing I received recently as I did my morning reading. I had just agreed to give this sermon, but hadn’t decided on a text, when I came to the story of Simon and the Woman. Then I continued reading, and found the very interesting verse 3 of chapter 8.

See, Jesus goes on from this incident, continuing to preach and teach, like Robin Hood with his band of Merry Men. And oh yeah, there were a few women, particularly some whom he had healed. They were from different backgrounds -- one from whom seven demons had come out; the wife of Herod’s right-hand man, the keeper of the storeroom and the manager of his household; and others.

But they were very unique women. They not only traveled with him on foot, they footed the bill. Unlike the male apostles, who would travel and teach and preach on their own, these women had to keep silent. At least in voice. For that didn’t keep them from furthering the spread of Jesus’ message by contributing financially to his work.

I would suggest, this morning, that in Simon, the Woman and the Women, are three examples of our typical responses to Jesus and the Good News. First, Simon, the Pharisee, the Holier than Thou, who says, “If he only knew...” Perhaps we can identify with him when we reflect on the good lives that we’ve lived, growing up in church, etc., etc.

Second, there is the Woman. Perhaps there are times when we can identify with her. We rejoice in his presence, breaking the bank of praise and offering that we carry with us, in worship and adoration of him.

And third, there are the Women. Perhaps we can identify with them as “the mature” Christians that we’ve developed into. We’ve come from different backgrounds and traveled different paths, but we have chosen to follow on the journey with Christ. We worship him, and we support his activities.

And that could be our stewardship sermon, ending with the question, “Which one will you choose to be?”

But there’s more. After all, my title today is “Simon, The Woman, The Women and the Other Women.” We’ve met Simon; we’ve met The Woman; and we’ve met The Women. So where are the Other Women?

Take a minute. Take a look around. See the faces of those who are here today. (PAUSE) You may have just made eye contact with some of the Other Women. I noted earlier that a well-told story can be very powerful. On this topic, I think the stories of other believers can be more powerful than the ramblings of a guy on facilities and finance whining about how we’re going to balance the budget this year. After all, as Neil noted last week, balancing the budget is not what stewardship is about. While facilities and finance is called to be responsible stewards of the gifts you give the church, that’s not ultimately what is important.

One of the most meaningful parts of being on facilities and finance for me has been to see response of fellow believers. However, so often, we’re not comfortable sharing those stories in public. But in the several years I’ve been involved with facilities and finance, I’ve been inspired many times. I’ve often found myself saying, “That’s a story that needs to be heard. Perhaps the way that person thinks about giving would be helpful to another person.”

So, over the last several weeks, I sent out e-mails to some people in our congregation. The e-mail went something like this:

Dear such and such,

This past week’s church newsletter, the *Buzz*, described “Unbound!,” the series of messages related to the tangible expressions of the transforming power of Jesus in our lives. I will be giving the morning message related to our financial stewardship.

I would like to focus less on theology and more on the experiences of people in the congregation. I would like to include the input of a dozen or more women in the congregation, and I would be interested in your involvement.

First, a couple ground rules:

I will not identify anyone by name, and will do all I can to eliminate clues as to who I am referring to.

Second, I am contacting a number of women who I see as “generous” people. As assistant treasurer at Waterford, I don’t see the amounts that individuals or households give to the congregation. However, it is my observation that people who demonstrate a

generous spirit in their daily lives are also often generous with their finances as well. I have seen or have experienced that side of you, and I suspect that others have as well.

Then, I listed eight questions and invited their responses.

In recognition of the women in Luke 8, I sent the e-mails only to women. More than a dozen responded. Of those, some have graduated from college; some have not. Some are married; some are not. Some have children; some do not. Some have chosen to exchange their time for paid remuneration; some have not. Some have spent a portion of their life in other cultures; some have, to my knowledge, have lived all their life in the United States. Some are young; some are “young at heart.” Some offered brief responses to several questions. Some offered up to two pages of hand-written notes. All were helpful, all were inspiring, and all have words to share. To those who responded, I’m sorry I couldn’t do justice to including more this morning. I could easily fill the Sunday school hour.

First I asked where they learned their giving patterns. Not surprisingly, most listed their parents. “My parents were generous, giving people for as long as I can remember, and we were expected to tithe on the money we received from the sale of animals, work around the farm and our allowances,” said one respondent. “Tithing was not an option – it was what we did.” Others remembered their parents giving them money for the weekly offering at church and the weekly “ritual” of watching her father write out the check for the offering. One person said, “Sometimes I looked to see how much Mom and Dad were giving. I don’t know how the amount compared to their income, but I remember thinking that it was a very generous amount.” Often, this happened with parents working in positions such as farming, where the income could fluctuate greatly through the year. For another person, the fluctuation in income caused a particular challenge, since her father had made a commitment to a local church institution’s building fund. Her father borrowed money to fulfill the pledge.

Yet their parents gave in other ways. As one said, “Mom always gave her ‘best’ for potlucks, fundraisers and Christmas bundles.” Another told of her mother preparing food for the “tramps,” “hoboes” or “walkers” that would follow the nearby railroad tracks. “Mom never turned anyone down,” she said.

For those who chose to get married, the example of a spouse has often been a learning experience, though perhaps not always a pleasant or enjoyable one. One said, “When we first married, one of our first ‘heated discussions,’ (never call it an argument) was about how we give – do we give a tenth, of our gross income or our net, and what if there are bills to pay and we don’t have the money? We finally came to an amicable agreement.”

Another said, “Early in our marriage I knew that my husband wanted to be rich -- not just to have lots of money, but to have lots of money to give away! He liked to tip beyond the minimum when we ate out. With visiting choir groups his contribution in the offering plate was well beyond what I thought was ‘reasonable.’ Special offerings were opportunities for him to write a generous check. Through much of this I had a grumbling spirit. I would have been OK

with giving the 'expected' or 'reasonable' amount, but this giving way beyond that irked me. We had a growing family with many needs; we needed to be saving for retirement -- why did he feel so free to give so much away? At first I would make a comment about his giving. Later I would just notice how much he had given. And even much later I came to accept and expect this from him. As the years progressed I became aware that regardless of his generosity, we always had what we needed. When business was slow and money was not coming in as it should have, at crucial moments, money would arrive. We have always been able to pay our bills and provide for our family."

The example of other family members or folks in church was also significant. One person's uncle loaned her the money to attend college, against her grandfather's wishes. Another woman recalls having her wallet stolen while working as a waitress during high school. A woman from church gave her a gift, replacing most of the \$70 in tips which were stolen.

And from another -- "I think of friends in a former church. He is a business owner who was very generous in support of the church and its programs. If someone needed a job, he made a position in his business, whether it was sweeping floors or creating an internship for a new business graduate. His wife is extremely hospitable, and she sometimes raised her eyebrows at her husband's ideas and generosity, but she always laughed, said 'oh, well,' and supported him wholeheartedly. He is now 85 years old, thrives on new ideas and seem to have no end of resources."

Reading about giving and the teachings of the church from child to adult has also played a role in these women's patterns, but it seems clear that the day-to-day practice of those around us, and what we learn by example played an even more important part.

The replaced tips is just one example of the life-changing examples of giving that have taken place for these women. Another related the story of being in an assignment with a church agency, where the very, very poor host family with five children moved to a bigger house to host their North American guests. They gave this young couple the one bedroom while the rest of the family shared the other. The young couple had the only mosquito net, and each day, the father would come into the bedroom to stuff newspaper down the rat hole so it wouldn't get into the room. "It was humbling to be given so much, by someone who had so little materially," she said.

Another spoke of kindnesses received upon moving to a new community, and another of the small kindnesses of friends during difficult situations, gifts of money but also of time.

Being the recipient of unexpected gifts, then, can be life-changing. "Although it is very humbling to be on the receiving end," one said, "there was no mistaking the gifts were given in love and support and were life-giving. I resolved to be more generous when I had opportunity to be on the giving end again."

And indeed, giving can be life-giving as well. One person spoke about the feeling she experienced when she gave her high school graduation gift money to the nearby mission board. On another occasion, a family member wrote out his retirement contribution check, but in an out-of-character moment, missed writing in the name of the payee. Feeling nudged, he chose to leave the line blank and took the check with him to church. At church, he was talking with an

acquaintance who shared about a financial struggle, and he realized that the blank check in his pocket was enough to make a significant difference to this person. The respondent said, “Dad realized that it was God’s doing that he had forgotten to put a name on the check, because God had plans for that money that my dad didn’t even know about. This just reminded me that if we leave our hearts open to God, he can do amazing things through us.”

Another said, “recently, we gave money to a friend. We specifically made it a large enough amount that it would effect our spending, at least for a little while, because we wanted to feel some of the pain that they were feeling. It has actually been a pleasure to bypass unnecessary items and think of this friend.”

Although the focus of these conversations was on financial giving, it’s clear that giving can also mean time. “I have been blessed with a healthy body and mind and am able to work,” said one person. “In gratitude I want to give back to Him though the building of the church and kingdom, by giving financially, physically and prayerfully. My job is one of service to others. I can be a ‘giver’ by lending a listening ear and giving encouragement to those my job relates to, as well as to my co-workers. I can also find ways of serving outside of my job with people I have contact with.” Another shared similar thoughts and continued, “God has gifted each of us in different ways, and I think we need to use those gifts in ways which bring honor and glory to Him.”

Another said, “sometimes when there is a need, I immediately think, ‘I’ll give some money,’ when in fact money might not help the situation. I need to remember to be generous with everything and not just money.”

And another, “It is my prayer to be sensitive to the inner prompting of the Spirit – a continual attitude of prayer. Sometimes my giving is triggered by a conversation I may have had with someone in need. I respond by giving as I see a need – it may be monetary or may be walking with someone and offering encouragement.”

Perhaps another person summed it up best, “I feel that generosity of time, possessions, money, friendship all spring out of the same well of thankfulness. Sometimes another person's needs can better be met by just a good listening ear, and that giving is just as valid and helpful as giving a lot of money to fix a problem. At other times, money can do a lot.”

I think that description hints at the “Unbound” nature of what true stewardship is about, or as one person suggested, to be “free to be bound to be free.” Ultimately, stewardship is not about money. And it’s clear to me in their responses that these women’s generosity is based on their relation to Christ.

One person said, “I’m glad Neil introduced the ‘Unbound’ series as stewardship – That fits with me and money. I avoid talking about money as much as possible. But I love to use it. I don’t want to keep track of how much there is, just of what it can do.

“When talking about giving, I want to include all areas of my life, financial giving being one part. There can be no relationship without stewardship, and true stewardship is a result of relationship.

“Generosity is not a word I use to describe myself, for I know too many selfish things about myself. But I would say I am somewhat detached from income and possessions. I do not assume that they are mine; nor that they will be here for my pleasure tomorrow. But I do enjoy having the financial freedom to share it. I feel blessed. Not blessed because of having, but blessed to be entrusted with enough to share.

“To live beyond the legality of a tithe is very freeing. To not keep track- or to not do the math- is freeing to me. It is very freeing to live in and respond to Grace!”

Another offered similar comments: “I believe that Jesus wants to transform us in every area of our lives, but we have to be willing to give up control to Him. That is not always easy in some areas of life, but, isn't that what Christian growth is--to continually let Him show us new areas that are not fully committed to God so that we may become more like Him?”

From another: “I have a friend who told me he wants his children to feel poor - even though the family is quite wealthy. He doesn't want the kids to feel rich. I think I know what he was getting at, but I always wanted my kids to understand how ‘wealthy’ they are, just because they were born in a situation where they don't have to worry about food, housing, education, etc. I want them to know how much of the world lives, and the need that so many experience. And with that comes a sense that I need to be generous - I *want* to be generous.

“As we choose to be generous we can live our lives with a bit of abandon in light of God's grace and love. I know that it is easier to be generous in areas where I feel there is plenty – in other words, I can give freely of my time when I'm not feeling stressed about it. The challenge for me is to hold all of that – time, money, resources, energy – in an awareness that it is a gift to me - I hold no claim on it, really. So how can I be stingy? That is the cutting edge for me.”

And from another: “I believe generosity of giving money is related to generosity of time, and extending to others love and forgiveness. I have witnessed my husband's unconditional love and relate it to his generosity. If we hoard our money and give it out grudgingly, do we do the same with our love and acceptance, giving only to those who ‘merit’ it? I have seen in him a readiness to give others a second chance, to withhold judgment and to say, ‘there, but for the grace of God, go I.’

“Observing this has brought me closer to an understanding of a loving, generous God, one who is gradually changing my outlook and planting in me seeds of generosity that will hopefully continue to grow and bloom as I allow God to work.”

And another: “I try to think of my money as not mine in the first place; therefore I can't consider not giving. When my husband and I look at our checkbook and think about money, we sometimes list off the things to pay before we get another check, but we never list tithe in that category. It is not a ‘bill’ to be paid or something that we have to do... and there is always money for it.”

Another points to the scriptures: “Ecc. 11:1 talks about casting your bread upon the water,” she said. “Could this suggest that it's OK to take risks, to be a bit adventurous in our giving? In the last few months we have taken some risks in opening ourselves, and our home, and

have received as much or more than we've given, especially in the form of special relationships. It feels like affirmation to keep giving.”

I would like to leave you, then, with two challenges, an immediate one and a longer term one. The first is to take a risk with your giving. Now I know this goes against the grain of the woman who said she doesn't like to keep track of money, but I think you can adapt what I'm going to suggest. Most of us do plan our giving in some way, some of us just do it in more detail than others. But over the next month or so as this series wraps up, I would invite you to take two percent of the money from your paycheck or however the money comes into your life, and cast it upon the waters. If your household income is \$52,000 per year, that averages \$1,000 per week, so 2 percent is \$20/week. Do something different. It may involve increasing your contribution to Waterford, or it may involve looking for an unmet need that you can respond to spontaneously.

Many of you do this kind of planning already, and I applaud you. For you, perhaps this is simply an extension of your financial life. For those of you who don't do this type of planning, perhaps this could be a first step in making your giving a planned part of your relationship to God. I suspect that there are some of us here today who could use more structure in our giving, and I suspect there are others who could use more spontaneity.

The second, longer-term challenge: Today is part of the time of year when Waterford does its planning. For those of you with mailboxes, today you are receiving our annual invitation to help plan the financial life of our congregation, how we as a congregation, will translate the financial gifts you make into the daily activities of the congregation. In your mailbox, there is a packet with several pieces of information. There are:

A letter from Pastor Neil and myself, inviting you to respond.

If you contributed to Waterford using the envelope system, there is a report of your giving during calendar year 2004, which is a duplicate to what you received earlier, and a report of your giving through the first quarter of this year. Our office staff prepared these reports and assembled the packets.

There is a purple card that may be helpful in thinking of your giving in terms of a percentage of your household's family income. When I asked the "Other Women" how they planned their giving, not the specifics of their giving, most of them suggested that they gave a percentage of their income. I'm not aware of any New Testament mandate that this be 10 percent, but that was the number most frequently mentioned. For some of you, 10 percent may be a stretch; perhaps that can be a goal down the road. If you've not given by a percentage of income, perhaps a starting point is to use the giving reports or other records, in combination with the tax forms that you likely have already completed or are planning to do soon, to convert your giving to a percentage. This also can help you think about how your giving might change as your financial circumstances change, for better or for worse. If you are giving less than 10 percent, perhaps increasing the percentage by one or two percent is something to consider. In the responses, there were also examples of those who have chosen to increase their giving past 10 percent, with some going as high as 20 percent of their income or more.

There is a yellow card on which we invite your response. From these, the facilities and finance team, Ministry Leadership Council and the pastoral team can build a spending plan for the year. To know what we can do as a congregation, we need a sense of how much might be available. I encourage you to see this response as similar to what Gifts Discernment invited you to several weeks ago and as similar to the opportunity for you to “name” your ministries that Neil introduced last week. This is a way to “name” your financial involvement with Waterford. It need not be seen as a pledge, but as a good-faith commitment of your intent to participate financially in the life of the congregation.

On May 1, as part of the offering, we will have an opportunity to collect and bless these responses. If you will not be here that day, please complete the card and return it to my mailbox (or the church box) on your own, hopefully by that time. There is also a green card. This has the same information as the yellow card, but it is for your own records.

Finally, I would like to leave you with one more response. “My husband plans our yearly giving based on our income,” said this person. “It is divided between local church, mission, colleges and other areas of interest. When I asked him how much time he puts into this process, he replied, ‘30 minutes.’ Then I asked if he prays about it, and he replied, ‘Constantly.’”

That’s the type of response that I think best describes a life of stewardship. She didn’t describe her husband’s prayer process, but I suspect that the nature of his prayer is to ask the question, “God, how do you want to give me away today?” And then, based on this prayer, I think that God responds in day-to-day ways that might take very little time in planning for the particulars. That, I believe is the response to which we are called, just like the woman to whom Jesus said, “She was forgiven many, many sins, and she is very, very grateful. Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go. In Peace.”

And we, too, can respond like The Women. And The Other Women. Thank you.