

## **Lectionary Text for the week of January 14, 2007**

### **Psalm 36:5-10**

Your steadfast love, O God, extends  
to the heavens,  
your faithfulness to the clouds.

Your righteousness is like the mighty  
mountains, your judgments are like  
the great deep;  
you save humans and animals alike,  
O God.

How precious is your steadfast love,  
O God!  
All people may take refuge in the  
shadow of your wings.

They feast on the abundance of your  
house,  
and you give them drink from the  
river of your delights.

For with you is the fountain of life;  
in your light we see light.

O continues your steadfast love to  
those who know you,  
and your salvation to the upright  
of heart!

### **John 2:1-11**

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Open Prairie  
January 14, 2007  
Rev. Curran Reichert

“Lachiam”

If you are like me you got your visa bill in the mail this week that reflects your Christmas spending. If you are like me, you spent a little more than you should have. If you are like me, you will be eating more peanut butter and jelly sandwiches this month. Well, that’s a nice metaphor but probably not very accurate. If you are like me the bill probably doesn’t change much of the basics around your house but it may cut back on your superfluous spending for a while. One less dinner out, one less movie with popcorn, one less new toy or sweater.

Jesus turns water into wine this morning, cool but of what concern is it to us? Jesus said the same thing to Mary, his mother, who in turn says to him, “Jesus, you better make it your concern. I have fed you and clothed you and supported your Call to ministry-we were invited to this wedding as a family, your dad and I brought a present for the newlyweds, what did you bring?” Onlookers might say, “Jeez Mary, he’s just a teenager, give the kid a break!” But Mary knows this child, she knows what he is capable of and calls him into his gifts. “Jesus get out there and do what you and only you can do. Give it all you’ve got.” He listens to his mother and Jesus turns the water into wine.

Given the post holiday malaise this may seem an odd Sunday to preach about stewardship. But those of you who were here last week remember me saying that every crisis brings with it an opportunity for spiritual growth. For some of us, the December bills present somewhat of a crisis, which means only this- we have a blessed opportunity to reassess. Remember, I said last week that most of us do not willingly make the choice to reassess what is and isn’t working in our lives- we unwittingly rely on the presence of a crisis to help us go there. The beginning of a new year, the end of a tax year can be one of two things- a crisis or an invitation.

Imagine you go to the expense to throw a beautiful wedding for your child. You install the electricity for an outside tent. You order all the best food and drink, hire the best band, only to find out fifteen minutes into the party that all the wine is gone. Here these people have traveled all this way, invested in beautiful wedding gifts for the handsome couple, and you are not able to provide them with the hospitality expected of you as an honorable host. Your daughter is looking to you horrified-what is about to happen to her big day? The in-laws are looking smug, they footed the bill for the rehearsal dinner this was your job-what are you gonna do now? This blessed day where all were invited to come from far and near is about to turn into your worst nightmare. And then out of the crowd a young man appears and saves the day. You raise a glass and toast Lachiam! Which means "To life!" Without skipping a beat the party resumes... old friends connect, your daughter takes a deep breath and releases her death grip...all is well because of one simple act of generosity.

I am preparing for a class on Stewardship and Fundraising to be taught by Ron Lundeen at Chicago Theological Seminary at the end of the month. For the class I am reading several books, among them "Creating Congregations of Generous People," and "Beyond the Collection Plate," both written by Michael Durall- they're good books. In them, the author makes the point that most churches are comprised of middle class people. Most pastors are convinced that people are giving to the church as much as they are able to give and as such are reluctant to discuss money or encourage people to give more generously. Guilty! The point was made that on average, in reality, most people give less than 2.5% of their annual income to charitable giving. I want to read a funny example of the ways in which some people supplement their giving.

"Occasionally parishioners supplement their contributions with cast-off items that are no longer useful in their own homes. The radio commentator Paul Harvey once told a story about a woman who called the Butterball Turkey Company. She found a turkey that had been in the freezer for twenty-three years, and she asked whether it was any good. She was told that if the freezer was at least zero degrees during that time, the turkey was probably still safe enough to eat, but they

wouldn't recommend it because the flavor would have deteriorated considerably. She replied, "That's what I thought. I guess I'll give it to the church."<sup>1</sup>

The author points out that people give to what they believe in, if they do not know what they believe in-if they are ambiguous about the meaning of something they are reticent to give to it. The book said churches must ask themselves, "Has the presence of your congregation made a difference in your community and in the world?" So, let me ask you, "Did this congregation made a difference in this community and in the world in 2006?" Can you give me some examples? Good, raise your hand if your life has been directly impacted for the better as a result of the ministries of this church? Ok, then we stand on fairly solid footing here, we know what we stand for and something about what we believe in.

Bill Ollila, our Moderator, reminded us in the January newsletter that we passed a deficit budget this year and that we would have to be creative in raising the funds to meet our goals. I need to be honest with you these are a few of the thoughts that went through my head when I read Bill's reminder, "Oh, right I forgot about that, maybe the wine has run out, maybe we are going to have to start giving less of our money to mission outside of the church, maybe we will have to scale back our programming." This was the first time in my three plus years of service to this community that scarcity thinking set in and it scared me.

As I read these books, and was reminded that the middle class is responsible for supporting the majority of sporting events, rock concerts, electronic sales, movie tickets, and what is considered surplus spending in our nation, I had to pause. The book suggested that if a middle-income family who writes a check for \$50 dollars to the church each week, decided to double that amount they would hardly notice the money missing from their budget. I thought about my own situation. This year I pledged more than I have ever given to a church, it is not yet ten percent but I am working towards that goal, and I chose to have it taken

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<sup>1</sup>Beyond The Collection Plate: Overcoming Obstacles to Faithful Giving, Author Michael Durall, copyright 2003 by Abingdon Press, excerpt taken from Page 46.

out of my account directly each month- so that I wouldn't be tempted to change my mind. You know what? Even though my bills were tight this month, my monthly pledge was removed from my account and I didn't even really notice it. Had I been writing the check I probably wouldn't have, some things are not better left to chance. This is a terrific quote from Durall's book,

"Anyone at any income level can become a philanthropist. One of the brightest stars in the world of charitable giving was not wealthy at all. Oseola McCarty took in washing and ironing all her life. When she was eighty-five years old, she gave \$150,000.00 to the University of Southern Mississippi for a minority scholarship fund. The photo of Oseola McCarty shown most frequently is one in which she holds her Bible in her hands. She was a church-going woman her entire life. We are aided in our spiritual lives and made whole by what we give. When we do not share in proportion, some part of our hearts, and souls begins to shrivel and become withered. This is incompatible with religious life."<sup>2</sup>

The author of these books believes that we as a church underestimate people's ability to invest in their own spiritual development- so we don't ask them to. I think we may be guilty of not asking this community to fully invest in its own spiritual development. We offer small group opportunities several times a year, we have started a library to have access to the latest thoughts on spiritual growth and important topics- these resources are expensive. We are about to launch a twelve week course called "Saving Jesus; Rescuing Jesus from Fundamentalism," featuring some of the preeminent theologians of this century- the program for this class was costly and it wasn't in the budget, none of these things were in the budget. They were programs that sprung up out of perceived needs in the congregation. In the past, when we have had a surplus budget, Council has been generous in affording latitude to create programming where the need for programming arose. This year we are \$3, 200.00 short of meeting our operating budget. There is no wiggle room there and the effect is not a healthy one for this congregation. The effect of falling short financially is that I find myself thinking, "can we afford to be offering these books, these classes, and these mission dollars?" Well the truth is we can't afford not to. Those offerings are part of the reason this church is growing both in numbers and in depth.

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<sup>2</sup> Beyond The Collection Plate Overcoming Obstacles to Faithful Giving, Author Michael Durall, copyright 2003 by Abingdon Press, excerpt taken from Page 73.

We cannot afford to cut back on mission giving because giving to others is what we are here for—we're a mission centered church! That's why I am here—I think that is why most of you are here. We are not a deficit congregation we are a church rooted in the abundant love of God. Durall says that, "We are aided in our spiritual lives and made whole by what we give." I want to try an experiment, I took \$100.00 out of my savings this morning and I am putting it in this basket. If thirty-two of you do the same we will no longer have a deficit budget and the church will be free to function as it ought to function, without worrying about financial resources.

This is a church that knows how to turn water into wine. I have seen it time and time again. People told us we could never afford our own building, on the day the tornado hit in 2005 a parishioner showed up to my house with a shovel, some gloves and a pledge for a \$100,000.00 to build a church. This is a church that raised \$15,000.00 in one day to put in the very floor upon which we stand. This is a church that says, "where is the need let us fill it." Friends this is the church that says, "We will make a banquet of abundance and all God's children will be invited into the tent. Here there will always be enough to eat, enough to drink and enough to share." I confess I've had my doubts in the last couple of months and for that I ask your forgiveness, because this church was not built on doubts this church was built on possibilities. When people ask me how did Open Prairie happen, I say because God wanted a progressive, inclusive church in Princeton Illinois, and when God spoke the people answered, "Yes!" Just as Mary called Jesus into his spiritual gifts, because she knew what he was capable of, we must call each other into our spiritual gifts for the same reason.

This is a new year, a chance to make fresh choices not only about the money we give to the church and other worthy causes, but the rest of it as well. How we spend our money reflects how we live. When a parent goes looking for a violin coach they don't usually set out to find the cheapest one- they set out to find the best one. When we've been diagnosed with a medical condition, we don't look

for the most inexpensive doctor- we look for the most appropriate medical care.<sup>3</sup>  
We seek the best for ourselves and for our families, we created this church  
because we mean to seek the best for God and for our own spiritual growth, and  
sometimes it takes a little Mother of God kick in the pants.

Michael Durall believes the motto of every church should be, “The adventure of a  
lifetime begins here.” Turn the crisis into an invitation, turn your abundance into  
an opportunity for someone else, turn this water into wine and the gifts will  
continue to multiply. “Laciam!” To life!

Amen

Endnote: The collection in response to the sermon totaled \$2,070.00, with  
promises from those who did not bring their checkbooks to church that they  
would bring their contributions next week. If you are reading this sermon for the  
first time and would like to make a contribution to support the ministry of Open  
Prairie, in the name of our abundant God, I invite you to feel welcome to do so.  
In the check memo please feel free to write, “The sermon made me do it!”

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<sup>3</sup> Beyond The Collection Plate Overcoming Obstacles to Faithful Giving, Author Michael Durall, copyright  
2003 by Abingdon Press, reference made to examples used on page 46.