

## ***The First Act of Courage***

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Luke 17:11-19

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The Community Church of Sebastopol  
Annual Appeal Kick-Off – October 9, 2016

I.

You may have noticed at the top of your bulletin the words “Annual Appeal Kick-Off.” And you may be wondering what, exactly, an Annual Appeal is.

That is a phrase meaning stewardship drive or pledge campaign.

Annually, right about this time of year, churches and many other organizations that rely on members’ financial support, begin to look forward to the coming year.

Today, those of us on the newly-formed Gratitude and Generosity Team, will begin appealing to you, the members and friends of The Community Church of Sebastopol, to provide a pledge toward the 2017 ministry and mission of this congregation so that the church’s leadership can create a budget that will enable the work we hope to do as a church in 2017.

Perhaps you don’t know that, as a congregational church, there is no outside funding source for our ministry and mission.

We are it. Our pledged donations make up over 70% of our ministry and mission budgets. The rest comes from renting our facility

Our donations pay for our staff and maintain our facility, as well as support our various programs and fund mission efforts beyond our walls.

I deliberately use the word “our” because I, as your pastor, am in it with you, not to mention that I will be one of the people joining the church as a member next week. Here at the outset, I want to share with you how I have come to a decision about my own pledge.

I do this not to boast.

Generosity comes in many different ways and at every income level.

I’m sharing this to let you know my commitment to our mutual ministry and because I know I can’t ask you to give generously unless I am trying to do so myself.

My wife, Brooke, and I have making a practice of giving away 10% of our income.

We are striving to practice what is known as a “modern tithe”: 5% of our income to the church and an additional 5% elsewhere.

We do this as followers of Jesus trying to practice gratitude in our own lives.

In a congregational church such as this one, most members can know, and many do know what the pastor is paid.

In case you don't know, you pay me \$80,000 annually.

This is how I determine my pledge:

5% of 80,000 is \$4000, so my pledge for 2017 \$4000 is \$333.33/month beginning in January.

I will pay that amount by going to my bank online and scheduling a monthly payment to the church.

That works for me because it is automatic and I don't have to worry about falling behind on my commitment.

And in worship each Sunday, when I touch the offering plate, I will pray silently \$333.33 to your glory, O God. Thank you.

I share this with you on our Annual Appeal Kick-Off Sunday.

You may also have noticed that this particular kick-off is one without a lot of fanfare.

There's no logo, no theme, no special ceremony.

Part of the reason for that is practical – frankly, I ordered our branding and mailing materials late and they won't arrive until Tuesday.

But maybe this is as it should be. Maybe it's okay to ease into this.

I mean, it's not easy to talk about money, especially in the church.

Isn't the church supposed to be about spiritual things that bring us together, we tell ourselves, not material things that drive us apart.

Most of us would rather keep our financial considerations separate from our religious ones.

Like vinegar and baking soda in a grade school project, combining these two might just cause the volcano to explode.

And yet, that is exactly what Jesus does throughout his ministry.

You remember Jesus, right, the one in whose name we gather?

He was always talking about money for some reason.

Following the lectionary readings from the Gospel of Luke this fall, we can't avoid Jesus' teaching about money and wealth and priorities.

As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, Jesus talks about money more than any other topic save the kingdom of God itself.

What is he after?

What does he want from us?

Why won't he let us keep our money in one pocket and our faith in another?

## II.

The Bible could be described as a collection of writings that is constantly helping people of faith to make a journey that could be called the journey from scarcity to abundance.

Some scholars tell us that the oldest story in the Bible is not the story of creation, but the story of the exodus.

Do you remember that story?

There is an enslaved people in Egypt, a people with no name, no leadership, no wealth, and no power.

Eventually, it is just all too much and they cry out.

And their cry reaches the ears of a compassionate God who also happens to be the one God, and therefore the only God worthy of worship.

In response, God calls leaders – Moses, Miriam, and Aaron – to get the people moving, to depart Egypt, and to trust that God will provide.

And God does provide: dividing the sea so that the people can cross over on dry land, releasing life-giving water in the desert, dropping life-sustaining daily bread called manna onto the ground.

Finally, after many wandering years, God provides a place to call home, a land remembered by milk and honey.

But then life happens, time goes by, and, like all of us, the people forget.

They forget that God liberates.

They forget that God provides leadership.

They forget about the departure.

They forget about Egypt thinking it wasn't so bad after all.

They forget about the parted sea,

the water from a rock,

the free toast for breakfast every morning.

They forget about the promise, the milk, and the honey.

And in their forgetting, they get anxious.

In their anxiety, they start grabbing what they can and storing it away.  
Fearful of tomorrow, they hoard instead of share.  
They count their beans instead of cooking them up and inviting the neighbors over for chili.  
They forget that God is a generous God who is always in the process of doing a new thing, of giving a new gift, of making a new way.

And having forgotten, having grown anxious, having been gripped by fear, they then find themselves teleported back to Egypt, as it were.  
And they have to make the exodus journey all over again.  
They have to make the journey from slavery to freedom,  
from fear to trust,  
from scarcity to abundance, all over again.  
And of course, when I say "they" I mean "we."  
We the church, we the humans, we, each and every one of us, has to make that journey again and again in our lives.  
For some of us, that's the journey we're trying to make every single day.

### III.

On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus encountered people stuck in the ways of anxiety and fear and scarcity.  
One day, he was traveling along the border of Galilee and Samaria, could have been the Mexico/U.S. border or the Syrian/Turkish border or the Russian/Ukrainian border, no matter.  
As he entered a village, 10 lepers approached him, but kept their distance.  
Do you hear the tentativeness in that description?  
10 approached, but also kept their distance.  
In the Ancient Near East, a leper wasn't someone with one particular disease.  
A leper could be any person with a significant skin condition or blemish.  
To be diseased in this way was seen culturally as a curse, as a kind of uncleanness.  
Lepers suffered doubly because they were also ostracized from the rest of the community.  
So, the story goes, Jesus enters a border village, the place where community gathers, and there 10 lepers approach Jesus, but keep their distance because that is what was required so as not to contaminate anyone, including this itinerant rabbi.

In their tentative approach they call his name, "Yeshua," and they use a respectful title, "Master," and they cry out, "Have mercy on us!"

In the economy of scarcity, there is never enough mercy, never enough grace, never enough kindness, never enough love.

And so, the cry "Have mercy on us!"

Jesus, in response, shows mercy, but he shows it oddly by reminding them of their duty to go and show themselves to the priest.

You see, in the Book of Leviticus, the priest is the only one who can confirm someone has been healed of a disease and therefore been made clean.

And the text says that, as they went, they were made clean.

Wow! A miracle! A healing! 10 lepers made clean. Healed of disease, restored to community. Hallelujah! End of story, right?

No, the point of this story is not the miracle of the healing. It is what happens next.

Pay attention to the verbs now.

One of the lepers *saw* that he was healed. He opened his eyes and noticed what had happened.

Then, next verb, he *turned back*. He was moved, he turned, he changed direction.

Now three more verbs in rapid succession: he praised, he bowed, he thanked.

What happened to him? He was, in a word, overwhelmed with gratitude.

Gratitude causes him to see, to turn around, and to make an offering of glad praise.

In that moment, the man makes the journey from scarcity to abundance,

from separation to inclusion,

from fear to trust,

and it shines through him in acts of thanksgiving and praise.

But then one more detail. Luke just throws it in there.

Doesn't tell us what to make of it, says, "And he was a Samaritan."

In other words, the least likely person to offer thanks and praise to a Jewish rabbi, the one considered an outsider and a foreigner and even an enemy,

*that* one becomes an example for faith, for trust, for gratitude in the face of God's overwhelming act of generosity.

The Samaritan is the one who commits what Peter Gomes calls "the first act of courage," which is, in the words of theologian Paul Tillich, to accept "the fact that God accepts us,

even if in our hearts of hearts we find ourselves unacceptable.”  
That’s a good thing to remember during an Annual Appeal,  
that God accepts us as we are,  
and that when we accept that God accepts us,  
we cannot help but respond with thanks and praise, for  
“God is more generous than we are, and to realize that is to know what grace is.”

#### IV.

As we enter this season of stewardship, this season of gratitude, this annual appeal, let us encourage one another to commit this “first act of courage,” to accept that God accepts us and our gifts, even if we in our hearts find ourselves and our gifts unacceptable.

The truth is that none of us need boast for “God is more generous than we are, and to realize that is to know what grace is.”

Amen.