

SERMON “ONE HEART AND SOUL—COMMITTED TO GIVE”

(Acts 4:32-35 Preached at MPC on November 5, 2017)

You might have heard the name Oseola McCarty in one of my sermons—Who was she? Oseola was at one time a washerwoman who lived and worked most of her life in a small, wooden-framed house in Hattiesburg, Mississippi in the 1900’s. She saved thousands of dollars she earned washing and ironing clothes for others.

She earned international acclaim in July 1995, when the university announced she had willed \$150,000 of her life’s savings to Southern Mississippi to provide scholarships for deserving, financially needy students. In donating the \$150,000, Ms. McCarty said she wanted to give others the chance to get the education she never had. She said she had dreamed of becoming a nurse but had to drop out of elementary school to care for sick relatives. “Her life, her thrift and her generosity have inspired millions,” said Southern Mississippi spokesman Bud Kirkpatrick.

What do you think of Oseola McCarty’s generosity? Was she a fool or a genius? Should she have used all that money to live a higher priced lifestyle? Or did she do a wonderful thing in giving the money away? General Colin Powell once said, “Young people especially need to learn the paradox of giving—that when we help others, we get back far more than we contribute.” Teens who tutor elementary school kids, or spend a few hours a month at a hospice, or give up a Saturday to clean up an empty lot, get to know the satisfaction early that comes from making a difference in someone else’s life.”

Today is one of the few Sunday’s a year that I get to preach about stewardship. I think Colin Powell’s statement makes a good start as a definition of stewardship. Stewardship is simply making a difference in our church, in Christian homes, in missions, in our denomination, or anywhere we may be planted.

Let me tell you a story about another kind of person: A man in a bar saw a friend at a table, drinking by himself. Approaching the friend, he commented, “You look terrible. What’s the problem?” “My mother died in June,” he said, “and left me \$10,000.” “Gee, that’s tough,” he replied. “No wonder you look so bad – you lost your mother. Man!” “Then in July,” the friend continued, “My father died, leaving me \$50,000.” “Wow. Two parents gone in two months. No wonder you’re depressed.” “And last month my aunt died, and left me \$15,000.” “Three close family members lost in three

months??? How sad and tragic for you!!! “Then this past month,” continued, the friend, “Nothing! Not a single dime!”

All of which might just go to show where our priorities and expectations may be misplaced if we’re not careful! What would you say about that person? Would you say he was selfish, out of touch with reality? Would you say that he does not value relationships, and that he thinks only of money? Now, which of those two persons would you rather be? You see, stewardship is a question of what kind of person you want to be.

In our text for today, these new Christians are described as being of one “heart and soul.” They were so committed to God and to one another that they were willing to “have all things in common.” They would sell their possessions and distribute the proceeds to all as one had need. One of those who sold a field and gave the proceeds to the church was a man named Barnabas, who would later become a leader in the mission of the early church.

A surprisingly large amount of the book of Acts deals with economic issues within the community, just as much of Luke’s first volume, his gospel, deals with matters of money. Consider the parables of the Debtors, the Good Samaritan, the Rich Fool, the Unjust Steward, the Rich Man and Lazarus and the Pounds. Wealth is not, for Luke, a sign of divine approval—it is a danger. “How hard it is for those who have riches to enter into the Kingdom of God!” says Jesus in the gospel of Luke (18:24).

A question for us to think about this morning is “What made those early Christians sell their property and give to the poor through the church? It’s in verse 33 that Luke reveals the source of this amazing community’s unity and generosity. While only the apostles were endowed with “great power” to testify to Christ’s resurrection, the entire church receives “great grace”—and that’s what I believe Oseola McCarty had—she had great grace.

The gift of great grace creates a community which naturally does all it can to provide for its poorer members. Grace enabled these early Christians to transcend the fixation on self and replace it with concern for the whole community as the highest priority.

So along with great grace, stewardship is about willingness, and not about coercion. Our

Scripture talks about generosity as the usual practice of those early Christians. It was not some one-shot event. And they had all things in common because they wanted to. Nobody made them sell their houses and give the proceeds to the poor. The same is true about our stewardship. The early church exemplified one “heart and soul”—they were totally committed to giving to God.

Jesus said, “Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consume, and where thieves don’t break through and steal” (Matthew 6:20). Invest yourself in the church; invest yourself in the people of God. The church is an investment vehicle! It was created by God to carry and move God’s people to bear fruit for God’s kingdom, all through the active and consistent practice of giving and being good stewards.

There are a number of models of stewardship in the Bible beginning in the Old Testament. All of them begin with the same premise that everything comes from God, all things belong to God, and that we are called to be good stewards of God’s property and resources while we are still on this earth.

One model is that of first fruits. In the Old Testament, a person would bring to God the first fruits of his crop and flocks. It was an act of deep faith because there was no guarantee of what would come next as second, third, or even fourth fruits. They did not give God the leftovers—they gave God the first fruits and only of the highest quality.

Another model is the gleaning model. The owners of the land would not harvest the margins of the land and would not pick up the grain that happened to fall to the ground during harvest. The poor, the widows and orphans could come and “glean” the fields and have provision for their basic survival needs. It was the sacrifice of maximum profit for the sake of the poor of the land.

Then there is the model of the tithe: one tenth of your proceeds going to God. This model of proportional giving with ten percent as the standard has been the most enduring of the models. Another model is holy poverty. A person sells all and gives to the poor as their way of following Jesus. Such was the path of St. Francis, and the monastic tradition, and others whose ministry to the world in Christ’s name has led them to a kind of voluntary poverty.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus continually challenges his followers to sell all they have and share the proceeds with the poor. When we follow Jesus, there is a serious rearrangement of our relationship to money. Jesus calls us to a generous and self-emptying way of life. Luke 12:33-34 says, "Sell that which you have, and give gifts to the needy. Make for yourselves purses which don't grow old, a treasure in the heavens that doesn't fail, where no thief approaches, neither moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Luke 14:33 says, "So therefore whoever of you who doesn't renounce all that he has, he can't be my disciple." Luke 18:22 says, "When Jesus heard these things of the rich ruler, he said to him, 'You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have, and distribute it to the poor. You will have treasure in heaven, then come and follow me.'"

Another model is the example of Zacchaeus who gave half of all he owned to the poor and paid back those he had cheated four times what he had taken from them. And finally, there is the communal model found in our text for today where they held all things in common—one heart and soul committed to giving to God.

I figure that I have preached on stewardship about five times since I have been your pastor, but today I want to take a different slant on this matter. I am convinced through God's plan for us based on His Word, that the communal model for giving builds strong churches and strong denominations.

I believe our church should model tithing. If the church doesn't tithe beyond itself, what are we saying and modeling to individuals? Our tithing to our PCUSA denomination through our primary mission source of our Presbytery of the Pacific, supports our mission work like Presbyterian Disaster Assistance at the General church level and at the General Assembly Level in Louisville Kentucky.

In our recent budget meeting last week Saturday, the 28th, brother Ed Kido's financial analysis of the church's historical data over a number of years, provided by brother John's numerical spreadsheets and budgets—the analysis revealed a down ward trend of giving over the past 3 years that should give us some concern. This year as we head into the final quarter of 2017, we are down about 10% in our giving. So, this year, I want to challenge our church to do better in our stewardship commitment to MPC and to our denomination.

When Pledge Sunday arrives on November 19th, I hope that we will make the commitment to give proportionally to MPC and PCUSA, but the long challenge for us is to raise our percentage of giving each year until we reach that model of giving 10% of our budget to the mission causes for our denomination. Such proportional giving keeps us more honest with ourselves and with God as we practice our Christian stewardship.

I close with the story about Ffyona Campbell—She’s an English long distance walker who walked around the world covering a distance of 20,000 miles over 11 years and raised £180,000 for charity. She wrote about her experience in a series of three books. Between April 2, 1991 and September 1, 1993, Ffyona Campbell walked across Africa from Cape Town to Tangier. Walking through jungles, deserts, and a 400-mile-wide mine field, she earned her label “the greatest walker of them all.”

During her walk, she was robbed and beaten; stoned by suspicious villagers; arrested for spying and detained by officials seeking bribes; evacuated by the Foreign Legion from riots in Zaire; taken to hospital with typhoid and malaria; she was near breaking-point with frustration at life in Africa and the scale of the goal she set herself. Yet she still managed to walk every step of the distance—this sounds a lot like the journey of the Apostle Paul.

On one occasion, she was taking a break from her journey and she was in a cab in Johannesburg and got to talking to the driver about her journey. The driver said, “So why are you doing this, anyway?” She said: “Because I said I would.” The driver replied: “Who did you say it to?” She said: “Myself.”

Ffyona walked across Africa because she told herself that she would! Nobody made her do it. She could have quit at any time, but she had made a commitment to herself and she was determined to stick by it. The great commitments of life are those that you make to yourself. That’s what giving to the church is all about. It’s about asking yourself what you really want to do. It’s about challenging yourself to achieve something great in your life time by giving your heart and soul cheerfully and gratefully to God and Christ’s Church.

Perhaps when someone asks why we give to the church, we will respond like Ffyona Campbell did. “So why are you doing this, anyway?” “Because I said I would.” “Who did you say it to?” Let us response to myself—and to God. Friend let’s give heart and soul

and be totally committed to giving back to God this stewardship season! Amen!