

A Future with Hope  
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“A Future with Hope” (Stewardship Sermon), Pilgrim Church UCC, November 15, 2015  
(Jeremiah 29:10-14), Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Once upon a time, there was a strongman at a Circus who demonstrated his power before a large audience. Toward the end of his show, he squeezed the juice from a lemon between his hands and said, “I will offer \$500 to anyone who can squeeze another drop from this lemon.” A thin scholarly looking woman came forward, picked up the lemon, strained hard, and managed to get a drop. The strongman was amazed. He paid her as promised and asked, “What’s the secret of your strength?”

She responded, “Practice—I was on my church’s finance committee for thirty years!”

Yes, my friends—it's Stewardship Season. And hopefully this won't be as strenuous as squeezing the last drop out of that lemon! Money isn't easy to talk about and can bring up lots of feelings. Some of us get uncomfortable or find it rude to talk about money. Yet in order for our congregation to have a present and a future with hope, we need money. Especially in denominations like the United Church of Christ where each local church is autonomous so we have to take care of ourselves financially. Today I'm going to share how I came up with my personal pledge and more importantly why pledging matters.

Now, many folks across the UCC advocate for Proportional Giving. In your bulletin is a proportional giving chart that helps illustrate this stewardship tool. The idea of a tithe—giving 10% of your income to the Church is in the Bible and many Christians tithe. Though some Christians have begun speaking about a Modern Tithe. Maybe you give 5% of your income to the Church and the other 5% goes to various charities, organizations, and institutions that also speak to your heart. The Church isn't the only place that does good in the world after all. Hopefully the Church is at or near the top of our personal giving though—because there's nowhere else where you will hear that you are accepted and loved by God, and where you'll be taught and strengthened to follow in the Way of Christ as people transformed by God's grace.

What's helpful is giving out of gratitude and in proportion to our incomes—whether we are making quite a bit of money or not so much money, retired or currently working, single or married/partnered. Upon first arriving at Pilgrim, I took my salary before taxes and multiplied it by 5% and that number gave me a ballpark figure of where my annual pledge could begin. To be honest, that number felt like a lot. I had just finished Seminary and like many people in my generation, relied on financial help from my parents, scholarships, income from part-time jobs, and student loans to pay for my Bachelor of Arts and Master of Divinity degrees. Giving away 5% of my salary right out of Seminary felt like giving to the Church may become a burden and that wouldn't lead to gratitude.

Discerning what felt right, I subtracted several thousand dollars that I pay per year on my student loans. That felt right because I wouldn't be here without my education and it took student loans to fund that education. So I multiplied that new number (annual salary before taxes minus annual student loan payments) by 5% and that number felt great. It was a challenge while not leading to economic hardship. Over time, my pledge has increased so this year my pledge to Pilgrim Church will be \$3,500 which represents 7% of my adjusted income. This pledge to the Church represents not giving until it hurts but giving until it feels really good!

When my parents were both working, they gave 8% of their combined incomes to our home church. Now that my dad is retired and my mom is retiring in June, they need to drop their annual pledge down to 7% because their economic situation has changed as they soon will be on a fixed income. They're still keeping their proportional giving as high as they can, though the overall dollar amount will decrease. My parents are sad about this, and it's led to good conversations about proportional giving since they're also figuring out their church pledge for 2016 right now in Ohio. Proportional giving is such a great tool because it's fair whether someone makes \$50,000 or \$500,000. And it's cool for me that even though my 7% staying here at Pilgrim and my parents' 7% going to Trinity UCC isn't the same dollar amount, we're giving at the same level in proportion to our incomes. And by the way, they did give me their blessing to share a little bit about their giving today.

Proportional giving takes some work to figure out though the chart can give you a ballpark percentage. If you're saving up for your kids' colleges or paying for your kids' colleges and want to take out those amounts you should. If you have medical expenses that you need to cover or burdensome debt, take that out. That's alright! Last week we heard about the widow's offering—that poor widow gave 100% of her income (which seems ludicrous!) Though by focusing on the proportion of her income she gave (all she had to live on), we see that those two small copper coins were worth so much! If one of the wealthy people in the synagogue had given that same amount, it wouldn't have been even 1% of their income. That's what makes the widow's gift so moving.

God loves a cheerful giver! So if you're figuring out your church pledge for the first time or what your proportional percentage even is right now, please just give until it feels good. Though if someone as math challenged as me can figure out proportional giving, anyone can! Seriously.

Alright so that's what I give and the proportional giving tool that may be useful for you as you think about what you give. Though the most important question we ask every Stewardship Season is why should we pledge? When we turn to our scripture, we encounter the Prophet Jeremiah writing to those exiled in Babylon. During his lifetime, Jeremiah witnessed the fall of the Kingdom of Judah, the sacking of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple, and then the forced exile to Babylon while some Jews eventually fled to Egypt (including Jeremiah himself.) To say that he lived in a tumultuous time is an understatement. In some ways, Jeremiah's time is like the events we have just seen in Paris and Baghdad and Beirut this week: violence, fear, and chaos. Once their entire world came crashing down, Jeremiah stayed behind in the ruins of Jerusalem to help people rebuild their lives. Jeremiah became known as the weeping prophet, often tearfully asking God, "Why?" and "Where are you?"

Jeremiah moved from lamenting to hope and trust that God is still with them. He writes to those Jews living in exile in Babylon, "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." [1] Hang on, my friends, it's going to get better. God is still with us.

It's impossible to know exactly how God works. If God plans some things in our lives or if it's our decisions that shape us with God sometimes guiding as much as God can. I always go back to William Sloane Coffin's words right after the tragic death of his son: God provides minimum protection, maximum support. Over and over in the Bible we hear about God's character: full of compassion, love, grace, and hope for God's children. Jeremiah is giving us his view of God, imagining God saying, "Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me." [2] God works with us to have a future with hope.

Linking money to having a future with hope in the Church could seem crass. But God gives us hands and feet and hearts and minds for a reason—to use them to the best of our ability, relying on God's grace. We work with God to have hopeful futures no matter what the present looks like. So when we give of our time, talent, and treasures, it's a representation of working with what we have to give (wherever we are on life's journey) and trusting that God helps us have a future with hope.

This year the Stewardship Committee has asked us to increase our pledges by 6% if we can. I am and hope that you will too. We have so much that we can celebrate in Pilgrim's congregational life. We've put in a lot of work to be more welcoming to seekers, and to practicing hospitality. We have a brand new sign so that people who drive on Coolidge Avenue at 45 miles per hour (not that I know anyone who does that!) actually know that we're here and can now read who we are! We redesigned the narthex so that people are seeing beautiful carpet, pictures of our current congregation, and works of art that our smallest Pilgrims have created. We've begun to better advertise our church events in local media and we're maintaining our website. We've begun new mission projects like the Cradles to Crayons pop-up Giving Factory. We've revamped our Church School curriculum and our church staff is offering new worship experiences and educational and musical opportunities to help all of us deepen our relationship with God and one another. This work we've done to better welcome the seeker and practice hospitality has to keep going to have a future with hope. This work helps people know that a church like Pilgrim is here in the first place. That there's a church that provides a welcoming home to all spiritual seekers and makes a difference in our world by fusing our Christian faith with everyday life and serves God by serving others.

At the end of the day, I pledge to Pilgrim Church because I believe that the United Church of Christ and our theology of a loving God known most fully in the compassionate life of Jesus Christ transforms peoples' lives. I believe in what we're doing here at Pilgrim Church. I believe that the worship services we experience and the church staff we employ and the programs we offer and the mission projects we undertake and the building we use and open up for the community to use makes our world just a little bit better. We shouldn't hide our light, but put it on a lamp stand and let it shine! God can use all of us to bring about a future with hope. May it be so with us, and thanks be to God! Amen.

[1] Jeremiah 29:11

[2] Jeremiah 29:12-13.