

Our Church Is a Giving Tree
Stewardship Emphasis
Psalm 1:1-6
October 9, 2011
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Omaha, Nebraska

Psalm 1:1-6

Blessed are those
 who walk hand in hand with goodness,
 who stand beside virtue,
 who sit in the seat of truth.
 For their delight is in the Spirit of Love,
 and in Love's heart they dwell day and night.
 They are like trees planted by streams of water,
 that yield fruit in due season,
 and their leaves flourish;
 And in all that they do, they give life.
 The unloving are not so;
 they are like dandelions which
 the wind blows away.
 Turning from the Heart of Love
 they will know suffering and pain.
 They will be isolated from wisdom;
 for Love knows the way of truth,
 the way of ignorance will perish.

--Nan C. Merrill
Psalms for Praying

It is no doubt significant that one of my earliest memories is of being in church. I must around three years old or so. I have a vague impression of being in the church nursery at other times, but that Sunday I have a strong memory of being in church with my mother. I remember sitting on a hard pew, with my feet in my little patent leather shoes sticking straight out in front of me. And I remember being in what seemed to my three-year old eyes to be an enormous space with a high ceiling, and way up at the front was a man wearing black, who talked a lot. I felt very small.

I am one of the lucky ones. I cannot remember a time when I did not go to church, when I didn't have teachers and mentors in faith. My earliest and most important teacher was my mother. She had this fierce commitment to justice, and an instinctive ability to cut through to the essential unfairness of a situation. When I was about six, we lived next door to a Pentecostal family. I remember overhearing my mother saying to my father, "Have you ever noticed that their church says Lillian can't wear any jewelry, but that it's OK that Burt can wear cufflinks?" Then my mother just rolled her eyes. Later, as a family living in the South during the tumultuous days of the Civil Rights movement, I saw my mother struggle with the racial prejudice she had been taught, but which her faith and her own common sense taught her was wrong.

I didn't grow up in that big church I remember from when I was three, but in a little church, with only about 30 or 40 in worship. That little church blessed me with many mentors. Brother Herndon, the pastor who baptized me. Miss Eva, who patiently and gently taught the junior high class. Rev. Bob Scott and his wife Idris, who when I was thinking about going to a Disciple college, drove me to visit Texas Christian University. Then when TCU didn't seem like a good fit for me, they made a 1000 mile round trip, taking me to visit Phillips University in Enid, Oklahoma. That's where I ended up going, and where I met a certain religion major named Rick Jensen.

The summer after my freshman year in college I couldn't find a job in the little town where we lived. My family was having financial problems, and couldn't afford to send me to summer school at the local college. An elder in our church, Mr. Caskey, paid

for my summer school tuition. All he asked was that someday I pass it on. I hope Mr. Caskey thinks I have been faithful to his request.

So many mentors and teachers and examples in faith in that little church. So many in every church since, including this one. Some of these dear teachers have gone home to God—but many of you are here this morning. Your example moves and teaches and shapes me.

My teachers and mentors in faith have indeed been, as the psalmist says, “trees planted by streams of water.” Strong sturdy trees that have been my comfort and shelter.

I was lucky enough to be taken to church by my parents, to have had the church in my life all my life. But the truth is, none of us come to faith on our own. We are all here because of someone else. We are all here because of the faithful generations that have gone before us. We are here because of those who throughout the history of the church have been “trees planted by streams of water” who “yielded their fruit” with such generosity and abundance.

About twenty years ago our family visited the Crystal Cathedral in Orange County, California. What impressed me most was not the striking architecture of that famous church but a scrawny little tree newly planted on the grounds. This tree had a plaque at the base of its trunk. The plaque said, “A gift from the Friendship Class to the children of 2015.” I imagined the Friendship Class as a class of senior adults, who in faith and love and hope planted a tree that children will play under long after the members of that class have died.

This is a wonderful metaphor for who we are in the church. We are all here because of someone else, because of the generations that have gone before that have planted the trees, built the churches, preserved the tradition, taught the faith, and passed all of this on to us. We are here because of those who have been sturdy trees planted by the waters.

I think with such deep gratitude of those sturdy trees who have nourished and sustained the church in times of challenge. After our congregation was begun in 1868, an economic panic swept across the nation in 1873, closing the young church for several years. It was the persistence and faith of the women of the congregation that kept First Christian Church, Omaha, going during the lean years. We are here because of them.

Church per capita giving reached its all time high in 1937. This means that individual church members gave the greatest percentage ever of their income during the darkest days of the Great Depression. Their faithfulness is a stirring example.

One of the challenges that we face today as a congregation is that many of those who have been our "sturdy trees" are passing away. We are saying good-bye to more and more of the GI generation, the generation which has given such magnificent leadership to the church and who have been such faithful and generous stewards. As we go into 2012, we know that due to deaths, the church will have lost more than \$40,000 in pledged income. This means that even with Rick leaving, unless we all step up our giving, we can no longer confidently expect to be able to sustain even two full-time pastors.

It would be a tragedy for the church to have to cut back its ministry so severely at this pivotal moment. Rick and I believe with all our hearts that God is faithful and that God is opening wonderful opportunities for growth in ministry here in this place. We believe that the church today has the same vision and faith as the generations who have gone before. We believe that God is calling us to seize this moment, that God is asking each of us to become those sturdy trees of faith for future generations.

Our stewardship theme this year is “Our church is a giving tree.” The Stewardship Task Force chose this theme because we see in this family of faith a network of love and faithfulness and generosity. In many ways, our church is like the tree in Shel Silverstein’s beloved children’s classic *The Giving Tree*. In the book the tree gives unselfishly to the little boy she loves so much. She gives her fruit for him to sell to make money. She gives her branches so he can build a house. She gives her trunk so he can build a boat to sail away from her. At the end of the book all that is left of the tree is a stump, where the boy, now grown old, can sit and rest.

When we read this children’s story—which like all the best children’s stories, is a story for grownups as well—we need to ask ourselves, who are we in this parable? Are we the tree that gives with such love and generosity? Or are we the boy, who takes the tree for granted, who uses her gifts so selfishly and thoughtlessly? Who will we choose to be?