

We Reach for a New Day

November 12, 2023

Rev. Sarah Campbell

Isaiah 43:18-21

This is my stewardship sermon in two parts: The **What** and the **Why**. First the **What**.

I grew up in the UCC. That's mostly very positive but there are some negatives. In the 60s and 70s mainliners were respectable, educated, staid and cheap. While the fundamentalists were tithing 10% of their income, we felt smug if we gave 3% of our earnings away. That's what I grew up in.

I was converted when I came to Mayflower. You all talked about money openly. It was kind of shocking really. You were unafraid, I think, because you believed so much in what your church was up to. The ministry and the impact-- within us, among us, beyond us-- is directly proportional to the money people give. You knew that well. Plus, you taught me that giving money away, (if you have it, if your food and housing and health care is covered), feels so good, so right, so meaningful. It feels better than spending money on more stuff you don't need.

You also taught me and my partner to have a money date in the Fall, the giving season. You said to carve out some time, sit down together, have a date with your partner or yourself so you can reflect on your money situation, and note if there are any changes from last year. A sort of Fall, financial planning date. Wow! **Now that's a fun date!** By the way, **curses** on those financial planners who talk about 3 buckets not 4, 3 like 1.saving, 2.spending, 3. investing or 1. essentials, 2. savings, 3.everything else... and not including a 4th bucket, for giving. Giving money away. Is curses too strong a word? I've come to think that it's not...knowing how much power money has over EVERYTHING including our souls. There's a reason Jesus talked about money so much, according to the gospel writers. Because money is so wily, and the way our minds play around with it is so wily, having a rule of thumb, a practice, a pillar, a commandment, a precept is wise. All religions have them because they know human nature. Mayflower uses the modern tithe as our guide, 5% to church and 5% to other wonderful non profits for the arts and mercy and justice.

For years, my spouse and I were moving towards the modern tithe as a goal. Once we paid off everyone's college loans, we finally reached it! Maybe some day, we will surpass it as many of you do...

This past Monday we had our date. Because my spouse finally started taking his social security when he turned 70 last March, we have more income, so we needed to do some adjusting so we could stay with the tithe. We don't do exactly 50/50, but it does come to 10%. This year we are pledging 7,900 to Mayflower church.

So that is the **What** of this stewardship sermon. Now the **Why**.

Why do we give so much money to church? This is where the words could flow like an everflowing stream about everything happening in, from, because of this church.... There's just so much, how do you capture it? all the layers, the specifics, the impact, the encounters, the relationships, the ahas, the groups, the experiences, the feelings, the ancestors' spirits, the interconnections, the outer connections with the world. Even the most involved member only knows a portion of what happens through church. It would take an excellent anthropologist a year of observations and interviews to capture it all.... Perhaps only a choral piece could do it justice-- poetry and music together... Not a requiem this time, but an oratorio of hope?...

I'm not even going to try this morning, to speak the long, exhaustive litany of what your money to Mayflower makes possible.

Okay Campbell, try to put it into one sentence... Why do you give so much to Mayflower?... and for me, it's not just money it's also a lot of my life energy.... If you asked me one reason I give to Mayflower, this week here's my answer.... **Mayflower keeps me believing that a new day is possible.**

This is a place that, when you enter through the gates of prayer, or to use Springsteen's metaphor when you get on board this train, (this hopefully soon to be clean energy train), ...you are in a place with people who believe, not naively but with great wisdom, that the future is not predestined or predetermined but that it is yet to be shaped. I want to be in a place that forever kindles the fire of hope in our hearts, a place where we hear our sacred text, "I am about to do a new thing, now it springs forth", where we sing together "This is the day of new beginnings" and pray together "your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth..."; a place that shapes how we perceive reality and how we act in this reality. I give generously to this church that has a daring openness to the unknown future.

Now you can walk through the gates of prayer into other churches, get on board their train, and maybe you have done this, where the people pray and sing and organize for a return to an imaginary past when people knew their place, knew their role, knew their gender.... when it was all clear. "I'm talking about the Christian right that wants to escape the present social reality into an imagined past found to be more congenial and less demanding, a highly selective and escapist nostalgia," (Brueggemann)

Or you can walk through other gates of prayer, get on another train, where the people believe the end is coming soon, all the signs are clear now, fires and war, and soon, very soon, just in the nick of time, God will sweep up, and save the righteous people, forever more into heaven.... Or in the same vein, though not God the savior, but science and technology the savior, just in the nick of time something will be invented to capture all of the carbon and save the earth or something will be invented that can take us all to another planet and make it livable there.

Or you can get on a train, more and more people are getting on this train, where the people believe in the inevitability of a dismal future... believe that time, like a machine, is inexorably taking us into extinction. On this train, there will be lectures on the Anthropocene, and you'll be left to believe in a non future "where people's beliefs and behaviors are inevitable and the earth itself is inert and

helpless.” (Odell) Now it *is* understandable--, reading the news that the oil companies, Exxon and Chevron, not only are not transitioning rapidly to clean energy but doubling down, going after more oil to get those big profits as long as they possibly can even while it is more obvious than ever that the earth is on fire, which suggests that greed and the power of money is simply inevitable, that it can't be stopped; that is not only the earth that is a predictable machine, but the human, driven by greed... understandable that this news might lead people to get on the nihilism train. In the remarkable book [Saving Time: Discovering a Life Beyond the Clock](#), Jenny Odell writes about this belief, what she calls declinism: “As distraught and clear headed and heart broken this assessment of our situation, declinism is probably one of the most dangerous forms of linear, determined time reckoning there is. It's an inability to recognize that fundamental uncertainty lives at the heart of every single moment, where our agency also lives. It is one thing to acknowledge the past and future losses from what has occurred, it is another to truly see history and the future proceeding with the same grim amorality as a video play head”.

I won't get on that train...Let's not get on that train. That's not our belief.

I want to walk through the gates of prayer, and I think you do too, and find a people who have a daring openness to the future. a people who grapple honestly with the past and how it continues to shape us sometimes in regrettable ways... a people who stay abreast of the news, from accurate news sources... a people who will grieve together about all the unnecessary suffering in the world, the violence being done to people and to the earth and to the hearts and minds of our own children who take it all in, all the suffering of the earth, way to easily and constantly on their devices..., I want to be with a people who will sing out together to the universe their sorrow and lament, not alone, but together because this grief cannot and should not be born alone.... I want to be with a people, do you?, who also perceive the good news always sprouting up, like the news from this week about a battery operated airplane flying from Vermont to Florida... a people who hold fast to the remarkable and true and often surprising history of positive social change... Who would ever have predicted the remarkably fast change in our state a decade ago from an amendment to “ban same sex marriage” to just six months later the governor signing a bill to legalize marriage equality... . I want to be with a people who will never stop being in awe of the effect on the entire world of what happened at 38th and Chicago, in Minneapolis Minnesota...that tragedy in the midst of the strange time of Covid that started an upwelling of protests... Protests that evolved into a world wide reckoning with racism and colonialism... a movement that has not mellowed, if anything it's picking up intensity as it goes deeper into cultures and governments all around the world. Did you read about King Charles in Kenya last week?.... Odell writes about these “upwellings or effervescent moments in which societies become consumed with the demands for transformative change. They often come as a surprise to even long term organizers. Time is the site of unpredictability and potential rather than inevitability and helplessness.” As Hannah Arendt wrote “The smallest act in the most limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness, because one deed (like the videotaping of the slow asphyxiation of George Floyd), and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation”.

“I am about to do a new thing, now it springs forth, do you not perceive it.” (Isaiah)

I want to be with a people who believe that the power of creation is always at work ; an irrepressible, restless, unstoppable force, woven into each moment; looking for times and places to stimulate the new, to overturn the oppressive and decaying, to scatter potent seeds of goodness. We call this power, this force, God. And we are ever invited into this new thing, to perceive it and then to quickly get on board.

Neither our lives nor our children's nor our children's children's lives, nor the life of the planet is a foregone conclusion. (Odell)

I want to be with a people who know the hard but real truth, that some parts of the earth may soon be uninhabitable, due to climate change, and that human migration will continue to happen more and more and *will* change human geography -- more diversity, smaller spaces; and change how we eat and travel; this is happening and will happen more. There will be losses and change is hard and brings grief... But it's also possible, exceedingly possible, to turn to clean energy **now**. We have everything we need and so not move into the *worst* case scenarios. And it is possible to live into this already altered future with openness and creativity and love. We are called by God to engage this immerging newness, to not deny it, nor despair over it. Behold I am doing a new thing....

“The world is ending but which world. Consider that many worlds have ended, just as many worlds have been born and are about to be born. There is nothing a priori about any of this. Consider that you were born not at the end of time, nor at the wrong time, but at exactly the right time.” (Odell)

I want to be in a sanctuary full of people who know they were born at exactly the right time. This is why I give generously to this remarkable church.

Sources

Brueggemann, Walter, Ancient Echoes, Fortress, 2023.

Hanson, Paul D., Isaiah 40-66: Interpretation, John Knox Press, 1995.

Odell, Jenny, Saving Time, Random House, 2023.

