

October 25/26, 2008

Faithful Living, Generous Giving

I Won't Lose My Footing (if I have shoes on my feet)

1 Timothy 6:6-19

Rev. Susan Bresser

In 1755 my Scottish ancestors came to Pennsylvania. In 1798 my great-great-great-great grandfather and his family came to Ohio, with three other families, settling outside of Cincinnati. There were no roads, only horse trails, leading into the wilderness of Ohio. The early settlers brought with them the seeds of Presbyterianism. In 1814, those in the neighborhood – including my ancestors – organized the Bethel Presbyterian Church, meeting in people's homes. In 1833, the faith community grew to 150 members! In 1839 the Bethel Murdoch Presbyterian Church was built, on land given by my great-great-great-great grandfather. (show photo of the church) Faithful living, generous giving. This was the faith community for my American ancestors. In 1933 the church got electricity. In 1949, members of the church dug a basement out by hand because they needed the space for Christian education and fellowship.

As a child, I remember making the trek to Ohio for the summer family reunion. We lived far away – first in North Carolina, then in Wisconsin – and what this meant for me was a long trip in a hot car with my obnoxious brothers. We would finally end up on the grounds of the Bethel Church. They might have had electricity and they might have had a nice basement, but they didn't have indoor plumbing. I remember my dad saying to my mom, "It sure is a quaint country church, but how can it ever be anything else?" And yet, my parents faithfully gave, and continue to give, annual gifts of money to support the ministry of the "family" church.

The day came for indoor plumbing ... the early 1970s. And then in 1994, they broke ground for a new addition: classrooms, fellowship hall, office space, and a modern kitchen. This is a good sign! Two years ago I visited the Bethel Murdoch Presbyterian Church in Loveland, OH. I was almost moved to tears. It's not only a beautiful building, it seems to me they do beautiful, real life-changing ministry. Compared to our church, the Bethel Church is small, but it's a healthy church, with loads of ministry and outreach and kids and youth and worship and praise. It's not a dying church ... it's an "alive" church because faithful children of God are supporting the ministry. Brent and I give an annual gift to the Bethel Church to support the ministry of the Church of Jesus Christ ... oh, it's a small gift, but I want to do what I can to make sure the doors are open so that people's lives can be changed.

You all have stories like this. You all have stories of heritage and history ... and woven into those stories are your faith stories. You are a part of this story ... the Sun Prairie United Methodist Church story.

The year this church was built, many families made great sacrifices. They went without to grow and build this faith foundation. Families went without Christmas gifts and many took second mortgages out on their homes to support the Church of Jesus Christ. Many in our community today can tell the story about their mom or their dad or their grandma or their grandpa who went without to show their love for God. Wow ... talk about faithful living and generous giving.

Someone's generosity has touched your life at one point or another. Every sanctuary and chapel in which we have worshipped, every church organ that has lifted our spirits, every pew where we have sat, every hymnal from which we've sung, every praise band that has touched our hearts, every church classroom where we have gathered with our friends, every church kitchen that has prepared our meals, every vehicle that has taken us on a mission trip, every church camp cabin where we have slept – all are the fruit of someone's generosity. We are the beneficiaries of those who came before us who were touched by the generosity of Christ enough to give graciously so that we could experience Christ for ourselves. Do we not owe the same to generations to come?

Faithful living, generous giving: that's our stewardship campaign theme. It's that time of year when we look back on all we've accomplished and we look ahead to all that we can do. Here's the reality: pledge campaigns are not about money, dollars and budgets but about mission, spiritual growth, and relationship to God. I pray that our stewardship efforts will build community, will unite all of us with purpose and will help clarify our mission. I pray that we can learn to focus on our need to give, rather than the church's need for money. It's important that we focus on mission, purpose and life-changing results rather than shortages, scarcity and fear of the unknown.

Faithful living and generous giving is about God being active in our lives and in our ability to respond: response-ability ... you might remember we talked about that not too long ago.

Have you noticed how dirty the carpeting is in Fellowship Hall. Pat yourselves on the backs, my friends, because you just might have the dirtiest church carpet in all of Dane County ... quite possibly in all of South Central Wisconsin. Why is our carpet dirty? Because not a day goes by that we aren't using this Church of Jesus Christ to meet the needs of others. Just last week during the staff meeting, Laura announced that there was one day on the church calendar showing the building would be empty. One day out of 31 days the building would be still and quiet... Guess what? Turns out Laura was wrong. The church was being used. We forgot to put a ministry event on the calendar. Our carpet is dirty because you all believe that growing and building our faith foundation is incredibly important and incredibly life-giving.

Thank you for dirty carpet. Though some of your financial support will be used to clean the carpeting, the most important thing is you have made it possible for the doors of this church to be open so that others can experience Christ and Christian community.

We are a successful church. We are a large church ... doing large church ministry. There are expectations placed on us by you, the members, the staff, the district, the conference, the community, the world.

You've heard a lot about our LOGOS program. LOGOS is a midweek non-denominational Christian youth ministry for children in grades 1 through grades 12. We have 35 senior high kids in the LOGOS program. This is only 10-11-12 graders ... 9th graders are separated ... they're in confirmation. I'm not even giving you the numbers of kids in 1st through 8th grade ... I don't know how many there are ... maybe eleventy billion

because they're all over the place. We feed 250 people on Wed nites. Our 35 sr high youth come on Wednesdays for a meal, a bible study, and a time of fellowship. Outside of church they meet for service-related projects and more fellowship. I have learned that our LOGOS program is a model for youth ministry. Many churches in our denomination and churches comparable to our size are hard-pressed to find 35 kids that come once a week for youth ministry. Why do they come? Because you let them get the carpet dirty. I'm serious. Because of you and because of your financial and prayerful support; we have young people who are willing to commit to a life of faith.

In January the President of the LOGOS Board of Directors and the Executive Director of the LOGOS program are coming to our church to visit with us and to celebrate the LOGOS ministry. The big wigs are coming to see us because of you.

If you've worshiped with us before you know that music ministry is a high priority here in this church. We have a chancel choir, women's choir, men's choir, ensembles, two praise bands, and many other gifted musicians. We have over 40 voices in the Chancel Choir ... and last week Andy, our choir director, made a plea for more voices. My first thought: you're nuts, Andy. That's like inviting more first graders to get the carpet dirty. What are you thinking? I really don't know where they're going to sit and I really don't know if we have enough choir robes or music or folders, but I don't really think that's a problem. Because of your financial and prayerful support, we have music ministry that is a model for other churches. We are simply offering praise to God and look where it's gotten us.

We are a successful church but we are still being challenged. We are being challenged to be even more supportive, more generous, more prayerful, more giving, more faithful, more committed. We simply cannot rest on our laurels ... we simply cannot be satisfied with our achievements that we make no effort to improve.

Here's the problem, the challenge, the tension ... we believe that if we don't have the right shoes, we'll lose our footing. If we don't have the right shoes, we'll lose our footing. (SHOES) Here's my problem – my downfall – shoes. That's what we're told. Fill in the blank: if we don't have the right _____, we won't be successful. If we don't have the right _____, we won't be accepted. If we don't have the right _____, how will we ever get ahead?

Americans live in an extraordinarily materialist and consumerist society. We are immersed in a culture that feeds greediness; we have an appetite for more and bigger, and this just fosters the myth that self-worth is found in material wealth and that happiness is found in possessions. We buy things we don't need with money we don't have to impress people we don't even know.

When people with different incomes are asked "how much more income would it take for you to be happy?" they answer in surprisingly consistent ways, saying that 20% more income would ease their burdens, help them buy all they need, and bring security. People earning \$10,000 think an income of \$12,000 will finally bring happiness, and those earning \$50,000 think that with \$60,000 they can finally get on top of things, and those earning \$500,000 feel that with \$100,000 more, they will finally have it

made! In other words, people who earn 20% less than we do think they will be happy if they can earn what we earn. So why do WE feel discontent with what we have?

This is not about financial planning problems ... it's about spiritual problems. We can never earn enough to be happy when we believe that satisfaction, self-definition and meaning come from possessions. We can never trust our self-worth when it rests on treasures that are material and worldly. At some point, followers of Jesus must decide whether they will listen to the wisdom of the shoes, which is the wisdom of the world or to the wisdom of God.

150 years ago if your great-grandparents were active in the faith, they gave ... generously. Chances are they tithed. Why were they able to tithe 150 years ago, but we have trouble doing that today? Were they that much wealthier than we are? Just the opposite. We struggle with generous giving because our hearts and minds are more powerfully shaped by our affluence.

I am asking you to take very seriously your faith walk, your commitment to the church of Jesus Christ and what that means for you and your checkbook. A value system based on materialism, acquisition and possessions is not sufficient to live by, or to die by.

We won't lose our footing when we are grounded in faithful living and generous giving. Won't you help me in providing solid ground for the generations yet to come? Amen.