

Advent Lutheran Church
Growing for the Future
May 4 2025
2 Corinthians 9:1-15

I've been blessed to learn from many mentors in and beyond the church. This morning I'm especially thankful for the Rev. Dr. Robert Bohl.

Pastor Bob held many titles over the course of his career. His most frequent title was Senior Pastor – a role he held less than 20 miles from here at First Presbyterian Church in Fort Worth. He also served as Moderator of his denomination's General Assembly, chair of the board of the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, and chair of the Board of Trustees at Princeton Theological Seminary.

I got to know Pastor Bob when he came out of retirement to serve as Interim Senior Pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Naples, Florida – a role that meant he was my boss.

Before I met him, Pastor Bob had written an article that still makes the rounds. It is titled, "The 'S' Word." The subtitle is key: "Stewardship is a spiritual matter, not a code word for raising money."¹

Pastor Bob writes: "Giving has always been a mark of Christian commitment and discipleship. The ways in which a believer uses God's gifts of material goods, personal abilities, and time should reflect a faithful response to God's self-giving in Jesus Christ and Christ's call to minister to and share with others in the world.

Those who follow the discipline of Christian stewardship will find themselves called to lives of simplicity, generosity, honesty, hospitality, compassion, receptivity, and concern for the earth and God's creatures.

Christian life is an offering of one's self to God."

¹ Originally printed in Presbyterians Today, May 1997.

Pastor Bob didn't merely write those words as expert advice to others, he lived them. For him, stewardship as a spiritual matter was not just how he acted but rather defined who he was. And, because of him, this increasingly became my perspective.

Our New Testament reading this morning reading is from Paul's second letter to the Christians in Corinth. In this passage he's focused on a practical matter, but he approaches it from a theological angle.

Paul is in stewardship campaign mode. He has organized a collection among Gentile churches to support the impoverished believers in Jerusalem. He's following up with the Corinthians – reminding them of his original ask back in the sixteenth chapter of I Corinthians. Paul wants this local church to come through by raising the funds as he originally requested.

He sends this part of his note as a stewardship reminder, inviting them to think about their giving to the glory of God.

Did you notice how Paul described their gifts?

- The gifts are for the Lord's people – a way to support the wider church
- They are promised in advance – think of this as the first century version of a pledge.
- They are voluntary – no one is forced or required to give.
- They are cheerfully given – folks are happy to share.
- They are generous – their generous giving is a direct response to their experience of a generous God.

Focusing on what people are asked to give is only part of the equation. Did you notice how Paul described what God gives?

- God provides every gift and blessing – entrusting God's people to use them to bless others.
- God gives seed to the sower and bread for food – God gives exactly what is needed when it is needed most.
- God gives grace – God gives the gift that God alone can offer.

It's true, Paul was fundraising. It's also true that this was much more than that. Paul had identified a very real need and was calling on people of faith to act in faith. He wanted people to step up and do their part.

Today, I'm in a similar situation. I'm following up on what I and others have been inviting you to consider not in the first letter to the Corinthians, but rather with our initial communications to all Adventers over a month ago.

I'm excited to serve a church that is committed to growing for the future! In a day and age when many congregations are filled with fond memories of the past and consumed with efforts to try to recreate what once was, Advent recognizes that we are called to live well and wisely today while preparing for what is ahead.

For several weeks we've prayerfully pondered what it means for Advent to grow for the future and what God is inviting each of us to do to contribute. This has included hearing Temple Talks from Bill Nytko and Kevin Kanouse, watching a video Temple Talk, and reading a variety of printed materials. Hopefully it has also included some conversation – between you and God and, if you are married, also between you and your partner.

As your interim pastor, my entire role is about preparing the soil and perhaps planting a few seeds. I do this trusting that Advent has a bright future that will only be realized as everyone comes together and continues to do their part to water, to weed, and to welcome the new growth that is just beneath the surface.

As an interim pastor, I don't belong here permanently. I am member of my home church – Cathedral of Hope. That was where I was before I joined you and where I will return when my time here is complete. And, since Hope is the congregation where Susan and I are members, it is where we pledge.

Each and every year, we commit anew. We offer our support of that congregation's ministry in multiple ways, including a financial pledge.

As an interim pastor who has served many congregations over the years, I have always given to my home church. I do so while serving in interim roles and also when I am not. And, because I am deeply committed to the congregations I'm with for a short time, I give gifts over and above my ongoing support to my home church to my interim congregations. More specifically, I have always given to unexpected needs and special projects not funded by the annual operating budget.

This morning, I am ending this habit. I am not ending my ongoing support of my home church and I certainly am not inviting you to do that either. Instead, I am committing to both increase and redirect the giving Susan and I do here at Advent. For however long we are here, 100% of our financial giving will be allocated to the budget.

Additionally, I stand before you this morning wearing one of my favorite stoles. It is adorned with a big red comma. This symbol is a reminder to never place a period where God has placed a comma. God is still speaking. God is not finished with any of us nor is God finished with this congregation.

God is still speaking through you and through me. God is still speaking through Advent. And, importantly, God is still speaking through our stewardship campaign.

I want you to know this year's theme – Growing for the Future – was selected by the Stewardship Team. They know that the annual operating budget, which we call a spending plan, for the year ahead is a spiritual document. Together, we are inviting you to become authors by making your commitment today.

We are not all called to do the same thing, but we are all called to do something. To plant something. To grow something. And, today, to pledge something.

May we all give voluntarily, cheerfully, and generously to our beloved congregation trusting that our Still Speaking God will take what we offer and transform it into the ministry our community and world so deeply need. Amen.