

“Sowing the Future”

Mark 4:1-9

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

A young seminarian was appointed to a country church. Soon, a snowy winter's day found only the new preacher and a dairy farmer in worship. The preacher said, *“Well, farmer, should I preach my whole sermon just for you?”* Replied the farmer, *“Well, preacher, don't know much about preachin'. Know a little bit about farmin'. I know if only one cow shows up ya still gotta feed her.”* So the preacher began. He prayed all the prayers, led all the responses, sang all the verses of all the hymns, and preached a fine, seminary-educated, well-crafted 20 minute sermon.

75 minutes later they shook hands at the door. The preacher asked *“Well, farmer, how was that?”* The farmer replied *“Well, preacher, don't know much about preachin'. Know a little bit about farmin'. I know if only one cow shows up ya still gotta feed her, but ya don't have to give her the whole darn load!”*

This sermon will not give you the whole load. Stewardship is a way of life that is sometimes described as time, talent, testimony and treasure. Today, I am here to talk about treasure. Specifically, I am here to talk about the relationship between our spiritual lives and giving money to God as a means of sowing the future of this church.

To do so I need your help. Unlike the farmer I don't know much about farming. How many of you are farmers? How many of you grew up on a farm? How many of you garden? Mark 4 is removed from most of our daily experience. We don't know much about farmin' but we all know about giving. So dig with me into the text for its fertile ground for a bountiful harvest for us today, for this church, and for Jesus Christ.

Sowing the future means knowing a little about us, tithing and God. (repeat) Jesus begins the parable by saying “A sower went out to sow.” It’s obvious. Sowers sow. It’s what they do. What is not always as obvious is that we are the sowers. Christians are the ones that Jesus has entrusted to plant the seeds for harvest. We are the sowers. We are the sowers in the parable. We are the ones whom God has blessed and entrusted to re-invest divine blessings in Christ’s ministry. Say “I am a sower.”

And please silently tell that part of your brain that says “I’m not important” or “One person doesn’t matter” or “My gift won’t mean anything” to “hush,” at least for a moment long enough to let God speak. The Psalmist said “Be still, and know that I am God.”

So be still. Hear again the divine partnership into which God called you at baptism. You are special. You are unique, marked by DNA and retinas and fingerprints unlike any, ever, in the history of the world. And you are a sower. And God needs you.

Sowing the future also means knowing a little about tithing. The poor economy has brought back some bartering, but mostly our economy requires money. The church is the same. Sometimes people will say “*Oh, the church is always asking for money.*” Always? Maybe. I do know that Jesus spoke more about money and possessions than about faith; that he said “*Where your treasure is there will your heart be also;*” that he exalted a poor woman—who only had two copper coins worth a penny to her name—because she gave them both to God’s work.” The Biblical witness is that our money and possessions are not our own.

This past month we have been invited to commitment to support the mission of Mary Taylor Memorial Church. We’ve been invited to consider our gift as an expression of generosity. The Bible invites us to commit a portion of income moving toward the tithe, 10% of your income to the work of Christ’s Church. This is not a new concept for most of us. But for too many, it is a concept and not a practice.

I know a little bit about tithing. For the Christian it is a benchmark, not a law. Some go beyond it; some never make it. But it is what the Bible tells us to reach for, and I would be negligent in my Christian calling if I did not urge you to do so. Few of us begin as tithers. I run marathons, but I did not wake up one day and say *“Today I will run a race of 26.2 miles.”* It took many months of preparation with incremental increases in training miles. So with tithing. I had just begun in ministry as a young man with a young family when I began proportional giving: not what was left over but a proportion of my total income. Over a five year period I grew my giving by steps, so that by the time I was pastor of my own church I tithed as I asked others to tithe. Over 30 years later I still tithe.

Sometimes people ask “before” or “after” tax. My giving is somewhere in the middle of those two, and I think one can make the case for both. But here’s what I know: if Mary Taylor Memorial is typical, our giving is about 2% of income. Even if we gave ½ a tithe, we would double our giving income.

Of course, tithing has benefits. Two people in a small plane crashed on a remote island. The plane was destroyed but they were unhurt. One sat quietly. The other got up, ran in panic, and returned wailing. *“There is no shelter, no food, no water. We are doomed.”* The quiet one replied simply, *“I make \$25,000 a week.”* Stunned, the distraught one shouted again, *“Did you not understand me? There is no shelter, no food, no water. We are doomed.”* Again the other said, *“I make \$25,000 a week.”* Replied the first, *“I don’t understand. We are marooned here and all you can say is how much you make each week?”* Came the reply: *“I make \$25,000 a week. I tithe. My pastor will find us.”*

By the way, whatever promise you make today, keep it! Make your gift every week, or twice a month, or by whatever schedule you have promised. That includes when you are away for the weekend or on vacation. The bills do not take vacations, and

your giving shouldn't, either. Remember that others are counting on you. Your gift, regardless of size, matters much!

Those who think otherwise operate on the “carnival” theory of church finance. A carnival came to town and one of the side shows was the strong man. The barker shouted “*Ladies and gentlemen, step right up and see the strong man squeeze every drop of lemon juice out of this lemon.*” As people clustered around, the strong man squeezed the lemon so that only the rind was left. “*Now,*” shouted the barker, “*who'll give \$1 to win \$100. \$100 to anyone who can get just one drop of juice out of this lemon.*” The crowd murmured but did not move. “*Ladies and gentlemen! Is no one willing to wage just a single greenback to win \$100?*” Suddenly, there was a rustling in the back of the crowd, and the crowd moved back as a small, scrawny, elderly man made his way to the front. The barker and the strong man could barely hide their scorn as they took the man's money.

The old man said nothing but took the lemon rind and began to squeeze it over a cup. To everyone's amazement, a small drop appeared at the bottom of the rind and “plop” dropped into the cup. The crowd broke into applause, because the man had won his \$100. But he did not stop. Despite his diminutive size he still squeezed and another drop fell “plop” into the cup. And another, and another, until the cup was filled with lemon juice. The barker was astonished and reluctantly counted out the \$100. As the man turned away the barker said, “*Wait, sir, you have said not a word. Where did you come from? Who are you?*” The man turned and replied, “*I am the treasurer of the United Methodist Church.*”

There is no doubt that church treasurers can work miracles, but they need you to honor your commitments and your Christian sisters and brothers. You will not give equally for your capacities are different. But my prayer is that you will sacrifice equally that you will keep the promises you make today.

Sowing the future means knowing ourselves as unique people entrusted by God with a capacity for generosity; and knowing and practicing tithing and proportional giving. But, fundamentally, sowing the future means knowing God.

Specifically, it means knowing God as the One who is with us always. Jesus said *“Lo, I am with you always.”* Sometimes we get overwhelmed: by life, by health issues, by the economy. Sometimes things seem impossible. Rev. Kieffer will be with us this week. I remember his installation two years ago. He held up the Book of Discipline and said *“My job, described in here, is impossible.”* Then he held the Bible in the other hand and said, *“But with God all things are possible.”*

All things are possible! God is a God of faithfulness and abundance and providence and mercy. I’ll tell you I know this: *“There are two plans, your plan and God’s plan. And your plan doesn’t count.”* Despite our anxiety about the present economic circumstance, we are a blessed people. Our lives are filled with abundance, even in times of scarcity. As Psalm 23 says *“My cup runneth over!”* Yours, too! Do you know that the 10% of poorest Americans are richer than 2/3 of the world’s population? God has indeed blessed us. When we understand God to be blessing us and calling us as partners and friends, we experience a contagious joy! We encounter and are inspired by Jesus Christ, who said, *“I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly.”*

Of course, these are free gifts from God. God’s grace and mercy are gifts. When we know God, we find a new enthusiasm in being partners with a God who loves and cares for us, who created us as unique, and who has blessed us with abundance. We experience godliness when, like God, we give. We need to give!

Most of you are familiar with the Dead Sea, that body of water in the Holy Land created by the River Jordan. Some of you have been there and experienced what it means to say it is six times saltier than the ocean. When you wade into it you can

literally feel it drawing the moisture from your body, it is so salty. So my question is “Why is it so salty?” Why is it so salty that there is no life of any kind in it? The answer is: it has no outlet. There is no outflow of waters. The Dead Sea only takes in, never giving away, and the result is death.

Giving to God is life-giving, not only for those we bless, but for us. Giving to God is joyful! It is just plain fun! Most of us enjoy spending money. It makes us feel good. It is a way to exercise power and influence.

Giving to God through the church is no different. It is fun and exciting to realize that your gift, your investment in God’s work makes a difference! You help children to be taught their faith; the home-bound and sick visited; the broken-hearted to receive comfort and guidance; the sacraments to be faithfully administered, the Gospel to be proclaimed and people from all walks of life brought together to faithfully serve those in need. Your gifts and your giving matters!

Indeed, it matters because we are sowing God’s future.. Say again “I am a sower.” Sow proportionately, moving toward the Biblical tithe. And not only “Go with God” but “Sow with God,” whose power, as Jesus’ parable concludes, yields a crop thirty, and sixty and a hundred fold beyond our gifts. Let us act this morning with glad and generous hearts, blessing God as we are blessed, and by doing so say “*Thanks be to God.*” Amen.