

**November 13, 2016**  
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**Sermon- “Awkward Message”**

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Tough week – no matter what side you are on, it was a tumultuous week.

I hope that you resorted to prayer.

I hope that at some point you asked God for guidance, clarity, and support.

I hope that when you caught up on your sleep after Election Day/Night that you said a heartfelt prayer for President-elect Donald Trump and our country’s leaders.

I hope that when you heard the words from the prophet Isaiah this morning you felt reassured by God’s steadfast presence.

*The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox;*

*They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.*

Our opening hymn expressed the joy we feel in loving our God.

Our psalm this morning called us to be joyful in our lives.

Isaiah translated God’s words of promise for us.

Luke gave us hope.

You see, my friends, contrary to what some people yearn to believe, Jesus did not promise to protect us from the pain of living in difficult times.

What Jesus did promise was that we would be empowered by God’s Spirit to stay faithful and to witness to the world about the way of Jesus and the life it brings.

It may feel daunting to face the call to be a witness to Christ in a world of suffering and tumult.

God, however, is not asking you to stand on street corners and preach.

Rather, in the midst of a world of suffering, in the turbulent times of our lives, our best witness is to

- reject selfishness and think of others,
- to reject despair and continue to hope,
- to reject violence and work for peace,
- to reject division and hatred in favor of love for those around us.

These Christ-like attitudes and actions do not require dramatic efforts. They are expressed in the simple routines of our daily lives.

This is who we are.

This is who we profess to be when we gather and pray – when we sing praise to God and invite God to be among us.

But we cannot be Christians for just be one hour a week in this Meetinghouse!

It has to be a way of life.

It has to be seven days a week.

It has to define your life.

It must define our life together.

At some point in time almost everyone here has spoken these words:

We covenant with the congregation and with God to *“walk together in God’s holy ways.”*

As a church community, *“we unite for the worship of God and for continued striving to know and to do God’s will and for the service of God and humanity.”*

*We acknowledge this church to be part of the universal fellowship of all those in every age and nation who are united by the Holy Spirit of God in Christ, and we dedicate ourselves to serve this fellowship according to our strength, ability and opportunity.”*

*And we dedicate ourselves to serve this fellowship according to our strength, ability and opportunity.*

Opportunities abound – not just for you to serve this fellowship but for bringing the message of Jesus Christ to the world.

I titled this sermon “Awkward Message” because today I am charged with reminding you that you are in covenant with this church and that your financial support is required.

It is awkward for me, your pastor – the one responsible to comfort and console you in times of trouble, the one responsible for bringing you joy through worship, the once who prays for your soul – to have to ask for your support.

It’s awkward because you made a promise to support the church and I now have to remind you of that promise.

David Hull at the Center for Healthy Churches wrote a thoughtful piece analyzing the difference between philanthropy and stewardship.

He makes the point that philanthropy is a combination of two Greek words.

The first is *philos* which is the word for “brotherly/sisterly love” or a mutual love between two people with common interests.

The other part of the word “philanthropy” comes from *anthropos* which means “humanity.”

Combined together we see that the motivation for philanthropy is the love of humanity.

Philanthropy is often what you give so that someone else can do the work.

Philanthropic gifts enable others in the arts, sports, healthcare, and education to do work that we cannot do.

We support them so that the work can be done, because it is important to the good of humanity that we love.

Stewardship, however, is different.

Stewardship is based on an allegiance to God who has entrusted us to be the managers of all that belongs to God.

The biblical steward was often a slave or a servant who managed a house that belonged to someone else.

Hull makes the point that “Too often we think that giving to the church and serving in the church is a form of philanthropy.

We are happy to give and serve as long as there is a mutual love and friendship for the other humans around us.

He says, “If the church is doing what we want, if I am being loved and accepted in the family, if my needs are getting met in this place, then I am happy to give and serve to support the effort.”

That is philanthropy.

However, stewardship is not about us, or about the church’s needs, or about how well we get along with each other.

Stewardship – covenant keeping - is about our relationship to God.

Stewardship is an expression of gratitude to God.

Stewardship comes when we are grateful to God for the gifts that God has given to us.

We offer our financial gifts and our committed service to God through the church because we are grateful for all that God has given to us.

Our gratitude is to God.

Hull argues that Stewardship is an act of obedience for God

It is not an option based on personal preferences.

It is the will of God.

God says, “Bring all of the tithes into the storehouse. . .” and we are called to obedience.

Faithful stewardship is joyful because we want to obey – not because we feel like we have to.

We want to obey because we are grateful for the gifts of God and we trust that life lived in obedience to the commands of God will be far better than what we can cook up on our own.

Philanthropy is totally optional.

Stewardship is not optional if we desire to be obedient to the God who has so richly blessed us.

Stewardship is also a shared ministry with God.

We are laborers together with God.

God has kept God's part of the covenant.

The church endeavors to keep it's part of the covenant.

Your part of the covenant is up to you.

In today's gospel Jesus called attention to the poor woman who gave, not out of her abundance – not out of what was left over after every other need was met – but out of her poverty.

Friends, at this moment in history we are the remaining remnant of a Christian society.

We are the ones who have been charged with keeping the light of Christ burning in the community.

We must seize the opportunities that we have to testify, to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ whenever and wherever we can.

Let's do this with joyful hearts.

Please give what you can, and perhaps a bit more, so that the important, transformational work of the church can continue to thrive.

Mid week, amidst the election aftermath and getting out the annual appeal, I had the opportunity to spend some time with a parishioner who was facing major surgery.

She had been cleaning out her desk at home and had found some

poems and prayers that she wanted to share with me.

It was a profound reminder for me of how easily we can get swept up in the daily tasks of our own lives and forget that God has called us to be ministers in his name – every day.

I share with you the gift I received in 'A Prayer' composed by Archbishop Oscar Romero:

*It helps, now and then,*

*to step back*

*and take the long view.*

*The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,*

*it is even beyond our vision.*

*We accomplish in our lifetime*

*only a tiny fraction of*

*the magnificent enterprise*

*that is God's work.*  
*Nothing we do is complete,*  
*which is another way of saying*  
*That the kingdom always*  
*lies beyond us.*  
*No statement says all*  
*that could be said.*  
*No prayer fully expresses our faith.*  
*No confession brings perfection.*  
*No pastoral visit brings wholeness.*  
*No program accomplishes the church's mission.*  
*No set of goals and objectives*  
*includes everything.*  
*This is what we are about.*  
*We plant the seeds*  
*that one day will grow.*  
*We water seeds already planted,*  
*knowing that they hold*  
*future promise.*  
*We lay foundations that*  
*will need further development.*  
*We provide yeast*  
*that produces effects*  
*far beyond our capabilities.*  
*We cannot do everything,*  
*and there is a sense of*  
*liberation in realizing that.*  
*This enables us to do something*  
*and to do it very well.*  
*It may be incomplete,*  
*but it is a beginning,*  
*a step along the way,*  
*an opportunity for the*  
*Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.*

*We may never see the end results,  
but that is the difference  
between the master builder and the worker.  
We are workers, not master builders,  
ministers, not messiahs.  
We are prophets  
of a future not our own.  
Amen.*