

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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Discipleship Series
John 12:1-8

My Time, Talents and Resources: For God

Our focus on the 6 marks of discipleship this fall brings us to the last of those marks of discipleship today. *As a disciple I will strive to give of my time, talents and resources.* If to some of you seasoned churchgoers this sounds like a stewardship theme, you'd be right about that! It should be no surprise that in a thoroughgoing examination of what it means to be a faithful disciple of Jesus we take a look at what we have in the way of time, talent and resources and consider how we allocate and use them. To be a faithful disciple of Jesus is to be a faithful steward of what I have.

In many ways the first 5 marks of discipleship on which we've focused on the last 5 Sundays have to do with the first two parts of this stewardship mark. For if we live out these 5 we'll already be on the way toward giving of our time and talents. It takes time to pray daily. When one lives a life of prayer, there are many moments throughout the day that are devoted to prayer—both the talking to God and listening for God as well. It takes time to worship weekly. If we think of a weekend as 7 blocks of time—a block being a morning, an afternoon or an evening—beginning with Friday evening and concluding with Sunday evening, to worship weekly then means devoting at least 1/7 of our weekend, one of these blocks—most often the Sunday morning block—to that weekly worship discipleship endeavor. That third discipleship mark of reading the Bible also takes a chunk of time if we're serious about it. Because a thoughtful reading of scripture requires giving it the time it takes to ponder the meaning of the words on the pages.

The 4th and 5th marks of discipleship call for the giving of our time too, but they also involve the giving of our talents. To serve in the church and beyond it is what that's all about. God has endowed each and every one of us with at least one, and often with 2 or 3, spiritual gifts that we are called to give in the work of the church. And as we've said over these last 8 years in which we've highlighted our spiritual gifts ministry, it's easy to give of our talents and gifts when we realize that God has already equipped us for that service. The 5th mark of discipleship of nurturing our relationships to encourage spiritual growth in others is also a time consuming and talent consuming undertaking. But again, as we've pursued these spiritual relationships we have discovered the rich reward that comes when we invest our time and our spiritual gifts in the nurturing our friendship of others in the community of faith.

So if we're on board with these first 5 marks of discipleship, it really should be no big deal for us to live out this 6th mark. And as I've just pointed out, 2/3 of that 6th mark are not a big deal. But what about that last third of this 6th mark—the part that has to do with the giving of our resources? For many, this very last step on the way to faithful discipleship is the hardest of all. It's the one that can make us squirm. It's the one that can make us feel threatened. It's the one where we might feel the most vulnerable because we're talking about our money.

When we look at the teachings of Jesus as they relate to these marks of discipleship we find that he was outspoken on all of them, without exception. When it comes to money, Jesus had a lot to say. The Rev. Charles Lane has suggested that the teachings of Jesus

about money can be put into two categories, both having to do with an individual's relationship with God. He says, "Sometimes [Jesus] talks about money as a threat—generally as a threat to a person's relationship with him. 'No one can serve two masters' summarizes Jesus' words in this regard. On other occasions, Jesus talks about the duty that accompanies having money. Those who have money are obliged to use it in the care of those who don't have enough." He goes on to say, "Although Jesus talks about money a lot, he never talks about the need of the church *to receive*. Jesus always talks about the need of the giver *to give*. ('A Daring Rescue—Reclaiming Stewardship from 'Paying the Bills'" *The Living Pulpit*, Jul-Sept. 2006, p. 10)

This is what's going on in the story of Mary anointing Jesus. By the way, this is one of the other stories about the sisters Mary and Martha. The most familiar of these stories is the time when Jesus came to their home for a visit. When Jesus arrives, Martha is all a twitter bustling about making sure that every detail is in order for the perfect hosting of Jesus in their home. While Martha is consumed with these details, her sister Mary, gives her full attention to Jesus wanting to hear from him and learn, making the most of her time with him. When Martha protests that she is left alone in the hostessing, Jesus gently tells her that she has been distracted by these details from the true need which is to attend to the teaching of Jesus.

In this story of anointing, Jesus is once again in the home of Mary and Martha for a meal served by Martha. This time, the gathering is interrupted by Mary when she comes into the room with a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anoints Jesus' feet with it and then wipes his feet with her hair. Those witnessing this act of devotion are stunned by it. First of all they would have become overpowered by the fragrance of this aromatic substance—usually used in the preparation for burial of the dead. But secondly and perhaps more importantly the witnesses were stunned because the cost of this pound of nard was 300 denarii. In the time of Jesus a day's wages was 1 danari, so if you do the math, Mary was anointing Jesus with one year's wages! Did you hear that? She was, in the few moments that it took to put this perfume on Jesus and wipe it off with her hair, giving the equivalent of one year's earned income. Lets put that into today's terms. What is your annual income? According to the U.S. Census Bureau the median household income in Gallatin County in 2007 was \$50,511 (<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/30/30031.html>). In those minutes it took to anoint Jesus, Mary was giving in devotion \$50,000 if this event had taken place here today! Can you begin to grasp the objection that was voiced by the disciple Judas who was outraged by this act? Can you resonate with the argument that this \$50,000 could have been put to a better more productive use in the name of Jesus?

Well much to the chagrin of Judas and any of the others who might have objected to Mary's extravagance, Jesus comes to her defense when he said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." (Jn. 12:7-8) This is yet again one of those places in the gospels where the words of Jesus can seem mystifying. How are we to understand how Jesus could support such extravagance? Does Jesus think that he deserved this lavish luxury? In his rebuke of Judas is he in a sense disagreeing with Judas that this \$50,000 could have been put to a much more efficient and productive use in caring for the poor and needy? Does Jesus, after all really not care about the poor?

To understand this story we must remember what it is that Jesus has taught over and over again in the course of his ministry about giving. Again, it's all about need—but specifically whose need? Jesus is always more concerned with our need to give rather than with our becoming convinced that we should give in order to meet a need. True followers of Jesus are those who understand their need to give as part of their discipleship. It's not about whether the needs being met with our giving are worthy or justifiable or meritorious. Disciples understand that all they have is from God and that a first gift to God is one way to show and demonstrate that understanding. Jesus as a good Jew knew of the call in the Hebrew scriptures that the first 10%, a tithe of all income, was to have been given to the temple, not to support the work of the temple, not to support the leaders of the temple, not to underwrite the cost of anything, but rather as a humble demonstration by the givers of their acknowledgment of God being the source of everything good.

With our focus today on this 6th mark of discipleship of giving, our annual stewardship campaign begins. Later this week you'll be receiving a mailing with what will look like material that you've seen every fall: a letter, a brochure, a pledge card and a return envelope. I want to challenge you today to look at this in what may very well be a new way for you to view it. I'd like you to look at it, not as a charity or other non-profit organization making a case to convince you that it is worthy of your charity or benevolence. Rather I challenge you to view it as an opportunity for you to live out this 6th mark of discipleship by giving extravagantly, as Mary did when anointing Jesus, with joy in your hearts, as an act of worship of your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

As I challenge you today, I also want to give you my testimony. As one of your spiritual leaders, you need to know that I practice what I preach. For nearly all of my life I have been a tither—that is giving at least 10% of my annual income to the church. I can testify to you that this tithing is not like giving to the symphony or the opera or the museum or to any other community or charitable cause. My motivation has little to do with my sense that the money I give is being put to good use. It has very little to do with any sense that I'm getting a good bang for my buck. Rather it is a spiritual discipline that helps me to keep my perspective on wealth and material possessions. By giving my first 10% I am acknowledging my utter dependence on my God for my life and being. So as we begin this stewardship campaign this year I want to tell you what Jody's and my pledge to the church has been during the current year of 2009. This year we have been giving \$144 per week to the church with an additional \$50 per month toward the retirement of the mortgage on the church's modernization project. The total of those two pledges is \$8,088 for this year. And I testify to you now that Jody and I intend to continue this tithing in the upcoming 2010 year.

Over the next several weeks you will be hearing about your need to make a pledge to the church. But let me be clear. The church does not need your pledge. Please prayerfully consider your need that you're being called to meet in making a pledge to the church. As a disciple of Jesus, among the needs of what we've been calling marks of discipleship is the need to give of your financial and material resources. For those who are not yet tithers, it may not be possible to make such a commitment in one step. Perhaps you can begin with a half tithe—5%—or a quarter tithe—2½%. It may take several years to get there. With prayerful and intentional step-by-step resolve, you can get there. So as you pray daily, pray for wisdom and guidance as you consider what you will pledge. As you

worship weekly, come to worship with an openness to hear how God is speaking to you in worship. As you read the Bible, pay particular attention to what it says about your relationship to God. As you serve in the church and beyond, consider how that is part of your giving. And as you foster and nurture spiritual relationships, be open to how other disciples can challenge you as you in turn challenge them.

Let us pray. O God who is the source of every atom in the cosmos, we ask your divine guidance as we consider our commitment to be a disciple of your son and our savior Jesus Christ. Calm our fears and clear away the doubts that we can make a full and complete commitment to discipleship. Give us the strength of resolve and the confidence that you will see us through as we grow in faith and maturity into the disciples you intend us to be. We thank you for the extravagance of your love for us, creator God, and pledge our extravagance to you as we worship and adore you. In your holy name we pray. Amen,