

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Sunday, November 8, 2015
Rev. Howard K. Bell
Praise God!

One of the greatest lessons that I learned during my work with people dealing with life-threatening illness is the power of focusing our healing intentions in the present time. In many cases when a person is diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, initial thoughts may focus on the past such as living with regrets or worries over how a person might have contributed to causing their illness. Another early focus is to immediately become anxious about the future such as anxiety over impending death. Therefore, the most important healing approach for a person facing life-threatening illness is to learn to keep their focus on the present time – empowered by living moment by moment. Many spiritual teachers in the field of complementary and integrative medicine teach that powerful healing can occur only when one is living fully in the present. I have witnessed many miraculous healing moments and even some miraculous healings that resulted in the person exceeding their diagnosed life expectancy by many years.

These thoughts came into my mind this week as I began to write this sermon. I believe that we may be facing a life-threatening experience for our faith community. Please note that I did not say a terminal experience but a life-threatening one. We are challenged with declining worship attendance, with a current \$31,000 budgeted deficit between our giving and our spending, with leadership fatigue that may be related to an outdated governance structure, with underpaid part-time staff other than your lead minister, with mission and outreach ministries lacking coordination, and with a building threatened by deferred maintenance and need for major repair. In the coming fiscal year, there will also be additional financial challenges related to the Settled Pastor search and the ability to offer the new pastor a just financial package.

Please let me quickly add that I am not dispirited about the future of this church. I believe we are fully capable of overcoming all these challenges. I invite you now to think about bringing yourselves as a community fully into the present. Today, we are having an important “Summit” after church to pull together vital information that we have shared with one another as we have begun to look into our future - looking into our future with hopefulness, not despair. I am excited about the sincere reflections that have been done in small groups and am most excited to participate with you today in a discussion that will lead to creating significant goals for the vital future of this church.

During the small group sessions as well as the one-on-one sessions that you have shared with me, I have heard the things that you feel passionate about in this church and in your lives. Some of those on my list were mentioned by only one person, but many were shared. I will read through these quickly, but know that you can ask me for a printed copy. Here is a list of some of the passions I have heard:

- Being part of a small, close, caring, inclusive and welcoming community;
- Inspirational worship experiences;

Preaching that makes us think;
Doing what the gospel requires in our justice and outreach efforts – some specific areas mentioned: Food for the hungry; shelter for the homeless; clothing for the needy; Open and Affirming/LGBT concerns including Marriage equality; Support for persons with Alzheimers; and addressing youth homelessness. (One person mentioned that we need to make sure we are not enabling dependence on charity with our outreach efforts).
Furthering and expanding our ministries in music, theatre, and all the arts;
Honest exploration of our faith including its relationship to science;
Respect for theological diversity;
Education as a value for all humanity, especially our children;
Christian education for children, youth, and adults;
Full support of our preschool;
Being faithful in our stewardship;
Good coffee hour and fellowship time;
Deepen engagement with the Wider UCC and ecumenical efforts;
Spiritual growth;
Praying for one another and supporting pastoral care especially programs to support elders and shut-ins;
Funerals and Memorial Services for deceased members;
Care for our facility;
Reach out for new members;
Reconnect with former members;
Maintaining our flexibility regarding members and friends; and
World Peace.

Praise God for the passions of this faith community!

I firmly believe that by giving expression to these passions and giving them the needed resources, we will assure that this church survives our current life-threatening situation. However, by living in the present moment, we have to also reflect on our covenant for generosity of stewardship – time, talent and financial resources. If we do not dramatically increase our giving in our 2016 Stewardship Drive, and if we do not increase our commitment of time and talent; it will be nearly impossible to fulfill the passions and ministries that you have shared as your hopes for the future. Also, if we maintain a commitment to not having a deficit budget, without increased giving, there will need to be expense cuts that could even jeopardize existing ministries.

Let us look briefly now at today's text for additional guidance. I was surprised in my study of Psalm 146 by two things. The first is contained in my reading and understanding of verse 3: "Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help." This verse caused me to reflect on priorities in my life. Even though I have been a person of faith, I also have put faith our country's political process, in our government and in the work of many non-profit organizations and charities. It is almost needless to say that my faith - in these mortals - have more often resulted in disappointment than in satisfaction and fulfillment. I am not suggesting that I will not continue engagement in the electoral and political process,

or engagement with non-profits who support issues that I believe in, but rather that I will remember to keep my faith in God and not in princes. And, if this is true, should I give even more of my offering to God through the church than through the non-profits that I support.

Secondly, in this text, I heard more clearly than ever, that concern for the oppressed was not only the passion of Jesus, but it is the core hope of God as identified by the Psalmist. Here again this list: "...God...who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry...who sets the prisoners free...who opens the eyes of the blind...who lifts up those who are bowed down...who watches over the strangers...and who upholds the orphan and the widow...(Psalm 146: 7-9) Praise God!

I was also surprised by my reading of our New Testament text from the Gospel of Mark. I do not remember previously hearing or reading verse 41: "He (Jesus) sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury." I find this image of Jesus being the Chair of the Stewardship Board most interesting. I have often heard reference to Jesus talking more about money than any other topic than the Kingdom of Heaven. Also, a significant number of the parables Jesus told focused on money. But this is the first time I remember reading that Jesus watched the crowd putting money into the treasury.

Biblical commentators suggest that this text has often been misused. Jesus did not glorify the widow who put into the treasury all that she had. He was, instead, calling attention to an unjust religious and political system that resulted in such income disparities; as well as a religious system did not follow God's hope to "uphold the widow." In today's text, Jesus also condemned the hypocrisy of the scribes and their parade of privilege. He also did not praise the rich people who gave large sums of money out of their abundance. We may assume that there was something lacking in these rich people. Either there was a lack of sacrifice on their part or because they gave money but did not invest their full selves – their time and their talent.

Biblical Commentator, Emilie M. Townes, provides additional insight on the widow's contribution. She says, "*The coins represent faith-filled offering found in presenting all of who we are and all we hope to become to God for service to the world.*"¹

In conclusion, I have felt it my obligation in the past few weeks, as your Interim Pastor, to repeatedly - in my sermons and my writings – alert you to the financial needs of this faith community in the present time. However, it is Commentator Townes' interpretation of the meaning of the two coins that I choose to leave you with today. May your gifts during this Stewardship Campaign – of time, talent and finances - be a faith-filled offering that presents to God all of who we are and all that we hope to become. May this faith community serve those who are in need both near and far. May we be of service to God in the world. In this way we will be able to truly say with our words and our actions, "Praise God!" May it be so. Amen.

¹ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).