

# Make It Grow

The first of three sermons in the  
2018 Stewardship Commitment Series “PLANT MANY SEEDS”  
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Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio  
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- Isaiah 55:10-11<sup>10</sup> “My word is like the snow and the rain that come down from the sky to water the earth. They make the crops grow and provide seed for planting and food to eat.  
<sup>11</sup> So also will be the word that I speak – it will not fail to do what I plan for it; it will do everything I send it to do. (Good News Translation)
- 2 Corinthians 9:6-15<sup>6</sup> Remember that the person who plants few seeds will have a small crop; the one who plants many seeds will have a large crop.<sup>7</sup> You should each give, then, as you have decided, not with regret or out of a sense of duty; for God loves the one who gives gladly.<sup>8</sup> And God is able to give you more than you need, so that you will always have all you need for yourselves and more than enough for every good cause.<sup>9</sup> As the scripture says, “He gives generously to the needy; his kindness lasts forever.”<sup>10</sup> **And God, who supplies seed for the sower and bread to eat, will also supply you with all the seed you need and will make it grow and produce a rich harvest from your generosity.**<sup>11</sup> He will always make you rich enough to be generous at all times, so that many will thank God for your gifts which they receive from us.<sup>12</sup> For this service you perform not only meets the needs of God's people, but also produces an outpouring of gratitude to God.<sup>13</sup> And because of the proof which this service of yours brings, many will give glory to God for your loyalty to the gospel of Christ, which you profess, and for your generosity in sharing with them and everyone else.<sup>14</sup> And so with deep affection they will pray for you because of the extraordinary grace God has shown you.<sup>15</sup> Let us thank God for his priceless gift! (Good News Translation)
- Theme: God is both the source and means of our fruitfulness.

Your church unapologetically asks you to give it some of your money. Some people think money is a too-frequent topic in church. Hmmm... yes, we do receive an offering of money every week, even though some of us prefer to give offerings on a monthly or quarterly basis. But talk too much about money? If your faith is supposed to help you relate your day-to-day life with your spiritual self, then since just about everything you do day by day involves money either directly or indirectly, then we'd be “on topic” if we addressed the role of money every week.

But as surely as this is the season for leaves to begin to go through their color change, this is also the *season* when many churches decide to stage fundraising campaigns for ministry to our congregation and mission outreach to the community and the world. So as not to come across as crass or materialistic we often use the term “stewardship” rather than fundraising. They're related, not interchangeable.

Churches have to raise funds. We're not taxing authorities. We don't send out invoices for the number of times we prayed for you. We don't bill you for admission fees to Sunday services. Churches rely on voluntary gifts in order to fund ministry and mission. But it's a church's *motivation* for the fundraising that makes the money you give to your church different from paying taxes or club dues or tuition or rent or mortgage. I like this clear, concise explanation of the word “stewardship”: stewardship is using the gifts given to us for the work God calls us to do.

Our Session's Stewardship group selected as this year's theme “Plant Many Seeds.” It comes from 2 Corinthians Chapter 9 where Paul writes “Remember that the person who plants few seeds will have a small crop; the one who plants many seeds will have a large crop.”<sup>1</sup> What was Paul doing – writing a column for the Farmer's Almanac? No. On a trip back to Jerusalem Paul had seen how desperate the situation was for struggling Christians there. They were being persecuted which made daily life miserable and even more difficult than usual. So on his

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Corinthians 9:6 Good News Translation

missionary journeys Paul had been enlisting the new Christian churches in Greece to take up an offering to help the Jerusalem Christians – he urged Christians in Thessalonica and Philippi and Corinth to contribute to the offering because (as Paul pointed out) the Jerusalem Christians were like “sisters and brothers” to them. The Thessalonians and Philippians up north eagerly and generously responded. Initially the Corinthians in southern Greece were on board, too, and Paul had used their enthusiasm to convince the Thessalonians and Philippians to show their generosity.

But while Paul was away, the Corinthians got ticked off with Paul about something – Bible scholars aren’t sure what happened. But now the Corinthians weren’t sure they wanted to share their wealth with anyone. So both for the welfare of the Christians in Jerusalem and also for the sake of his credibility with the generous Thessalonians and Philippians, Paul had to help the Corinthians remember why being generous with their money was a demonstration of their newfound trust in God.

You may think, “A stewardship theme about seeds and planting is more appropriate for Amish country than here. We’re more likely to pay someone to plant seeds than get our hands dirty.” Actually, I wonder if the Corinthians thought the same thing. Corinth had a reputation for being cosmopolitan – “cosmopolitan” is Greek meaning “city of the world.” Corinth was a place of commerce, shipping, a crossroads of the Mediterranean, populated by people from many ethnicities. But certainly even the Corinthians had to grow crops to feed themselves; from childhood people would have known what it was to plant and tend and harvest. So Paul used agricultural imagery to help them see why their generosity would not be a loss. Rather, their generosity would be an investment that, by God’s gracious favor, would be returned in a harvest of abundance.

In the gospels we’ve heard other illustrations that echo the biblical belief that “the one who plants many seeds will have a large crop.”

- In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus points out the foolishness of failing to put to use a gift one’s been given when he cautions,
 

“<sup>15</sup>No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bowl; instead it is put on the lampstand, where it gives light for everyone in the house. <sup>16</sup>In the same way your light must shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven.”<sup>2</sup>
- Later in Matthew’s gospel Jesus tells a parable about a stern boss who entrusts three employees with some of his money to invest while he was away on a trip. Two used what was given to them to produce a profit, but the third was too timid to use what was entrusted to him, instead burying it in the ground. When the boss returned, he was upset by the employee’s failure to put to good use the money the boss had entrusted to him.<sup>3</sup>

Lillian Daniels is a pastor of First Congregational Church in Dubuque, Iowa. I feel like I know her because she’s one of the frequent contributors to the United Church of Christ’s free online daily devotional I read regularly. I saved this one she wrote a few years ago in which she offered what she called “Confessions of a Freeloader.” She opened the column with 1 Thessalonians 5:18 which urges, “Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” Here’s what Lillian wrote:

At Thanksgiving, I come in from out of town, and eat a meal that someone else cooked, in a house that someone else cleaned, enjoying entertainment that someone else planned.

On Christmas Eve and Easter, I have the nerve to do it in my own town. I join a family I was not born into and enjoy the company of children I did not raise. I get to bring the children I did raise with me. Then they get to eat food we did not cook, because that’s how I raised ’em.

On July 4<sup>th</sup>, I eat a pancake breakfast I did nothing to make at a party I did not throw. I watch a parade I did not plan and [enjoy] fireworks someone else set off. Then I eat hotdogs I did not grill on a lawn I did not mow....

Even on workdays, I drink coffee I did not brew. I use a bathroom I did not clean. At meetings, I sit on chairs I did not set up. Then I walk out, leaving chairs I did not put away. And at least once a day, I look at flowers I did not plant, water or arrange.

In other words, I’m a freeloader. And I admit it....

Why? Because sometimes, when I’m not busy freeloading, I can fall prey to score-keeping.

So I keep this list handy. It reminds me that the balance sheet of my own life is far from reconciled.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 5:15-16 Good News Translation

<sup>3</sup> See Matthew 25:14-30

I'm a freeloader, who gets more than I deserve.<sup>4</sup>

It's possible that you might identify with Reverend Daniels—you marvel at how many doors have been opened for you, how often the pathway has been smoothed before you, allowing you to enjoy the productive, satisfying life you have.

Or it's possible that you think back on your life and how hard you worked to arrive where you are, how much effort and time it took, how many sacrifices you endured. Now there's something "hard-wired" or programmed into you that convinces you that you deserve what you have, that you've earned every benefit and blessing. Maybe a little voice inside you tells you that you've been short-changed from what you deserve and that actually you don't have enough.<sup>5</sup>

I suggest that some truth can be found in both perspectives. Certainly you have reaped rewards from your industriousness and perseverance. And certainly you have enjoyed benefits that you had no hand in bringing to fruition.

What's true for all of us is that our love for Jesus has allowed us to embrace a worldview that has God at the center, that has God as the foundation, that has God at the heart of it all. In our worldview we recognize God as the One at work behind the scenes in all of life. God's work often occurs invisibly, silently, sometimes in the twinkling of an eye and other times over hours or months or centuries or eons. God doesn't hold out for a spotlight of recognition as a condition for being generous and compassionate and providential.

God entrusts to us undeserved blessings. Like the boss Jesus described preparing for a trip, God expects us to put to work what we've been given. You and I both know that the church is not the only place where you inspire charity through your gifts of your time and your money. You may support medical centers and shelters for abused women or neglected children. You may support schools and public broadcasting, or cultural organizations and nature conservancies. Maybe you even support other churches that have been important in your life. But here's the truth: this church is dependent on the seeds you plant right here.

Take a look at the bulletin's front cover. Find the tenth verse of this year's stewardship scripture passage, highlighted in bold text. Paul states that God provides the sower not only with the material to invest—the seed—but also with the sustenance to do the work—daily bread to eat. Paul then assures the Corinthians (and we "Riverpresbyterians"! ) that God stands ready to do that for us, too: God gives us enough seed to plant generously, and provides the growth to produce a "rich harvest." We plant seeds of kindness. Seeds of encouragement. Seeds of comfort. Seeds of hope. Seeds of strength and fellowship and partnership. And realize this: through our generosity with our time and skill and money and compassion, we plant seeds that will bear fruit in the lives of others. Inspired by the way of Jesus, we can't simply look out for ourselves.

How much we give is determined by our sense of how much we have received. Everything scripture says about giving is in the context of what God has first given us. And what has God given us? Our next breath. Life itself. God's love to know joy and assurance through life and death, sickness and health. Life eternal. Salvation. Confidence that no trouble we know, not even the worst evil, can defeat the goodness God wants in and for us.<sup>6</sup>

Through this year's "Plant Many Seeds" Campaign for Stewardship Commitment, "We are inviting you to invest yourself through the resources that God has given you—your energy, your prayers, and your money—in this work to which God has called us."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "Gratitude—Confessions of a Freeloader" by Lillian Daniels for *StillSpeaking Daily Devotional*, United Church of Christ, January 3, 2015

<sup>5</sup> Based on reflections in *New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. XI*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000, 132.

<sup>6</sup> From "What Scripture Says About Giving" produced by Stewardship and Church Finances of the United Church of Christ.

<sup>7</sup> "Fundraising as Ministry" from *A Spirituality of Fundraising*, p. 17.