

**AMISTAD CHAPEL**  
**The Rev. John Tamilio III, Guest Preacher**  
**Wednesday, October 22, 2009 — Pentecost XXIII**

**Sermon Title: “The Best of Times, The Worst of Times”**  
**Text: Proverbs 11:23-31 (The Message)**

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Thank you for inviting me to be your guest preacher at the Amistad Chapel this morning. I bring you greetings on behalf of the members and friends of Pilgrim Congregational United Church of Christ located right here in Cleveland, Ohio. Pilgrim is a four minute drive from here — if you are able to avoid the ubiquitous construction. It is located in the Tremont section of the city.

The Tremont community is no stranger to the economic hardships that have plagued this nation in recent months. Tremont has been struggling with them much longer than the average American community: homelessness, unemployment, lack of affordable healthcare, mortgage foreclosures, high gas prices, crumbling 401k and retirement accounts...you name it. The recent Wall Street bailout, and the effect that it has had on large corporations and start-up businesses alike (not to mention a certain hockey mom’s Joe Sixpack), has made us all the more aware of the financial crisis enveloping this country like an ominous hurricane. When such crises hit, it is often non-profit organizations that feel the pinch the hardest. When people hardly have enough money to pay their mortgages, car loans, and credit cards, they are unlikely to make contributions to their local art museums, the United Way, or their churches. But if this is the attitude that our parishioners have toward giving — if this is how they budget their money — then we haven’t done a good job educating them about the proper way to think about stewardship.

The ancient Hebrew concept of offering our first fruits to God, as opposed to the guidelines offered by Ameriprise Financial Services, needs to be our guideline here. The Israelites did not figure out how much grain they needed to sustain them after the harvest and *then* made their offerings to Yahweh. First, the people made their offerings to God — the choicest selections from their grain and cattle — and then, with what was left over, they would budget what they needed for the season.

How often do we do this? How often do we encourage our congregants to do the same: to look at their prospective incomes for the coming year and to first set aside an offering to God that is a joyful expression of thanksgiving for the blessings that God has already poured into their lives as a means of deepening their spirituality? Some would say that during times like these, when the market is flailing and is set on a course of total unpredictability, that such a philosophy of stewardship is no longer tenable: it will fall on deaf ears, at best, or it will be dismissed as totally ludicrous. “How can we give generously to our church homes when we do not even know if we will be able to keep our own homes?” our parishioners may *reasonably* respond. Again, such thinking, though totally understandable, needs to be reframed.

I was recently talking to one of my parishioners who told me that when she moved to Ohio and purchased her home, she met with her mortgage broker. They went through all of the usual pre-qualifying paperwork and she listed her church pledge as a debt. When her broker said, “You don’t understand: that is a charitable contribution; it really isn’t considered a debt.” She responded, “I am afraid that you don’t understand: if I lose my job or times get tough, I will pay my church pledge before I mail you my mortgage payment.” *I am surprised that she was still approved. Now that’s evangelical courage!*

Now I am not recommending to you (or to my parishioners) that they pay their church pledges instead of their mortgages, although that would be a wonderful message to send to Fannie Mae and Freddie Mack, wouldn’t it? What a reorientation of our cultural values! *Giving to God before we give to Caesar!* My parishioner’s candor with her mortgage broker, though, was a bit of that Levitical prioritization: giving the first fruits to God. The church pledge is paid before the mortgage, or the utility bills, or the money owed to American Express.

But there is more going on here than that.

In times of uncertainty — be they economic, political, or social — people long for something solid to anchor their spirits, to give them what Bob Dylan called “shelter from the storm.” Our still speaking God is that sense of security, my friends. No, God does not guarantee that the market will turn around, nor does God promise that we will not lose our jobs, our homes, or our retirement accounts. But God does promise to be fully present with us through whatever crises and hardships we encounter — be they on the golden corridors of Wall Street or on the back alleys of Main Street. Maybe our fiscal commitment to our local congregations and denominational programs such as Our Church’s Wider Mission is a

sign of our trust in God’s perpetual presence! People need to see that what we are about in the church is life changing, spiritual work: that whether we are floating on peaks or trudging through valleys, the Good News is that God is fully present with us. The stewardship work that we do in our churches needs to foster this spiritual connection between God and God’s people, rather than being about balancing budgets and meeting fiscal obligations. In his book *Creating Congregations of Generous People*, Michael Durall writes “if people come to church out of routine or habit and have low expectations of what the church can accomplish or how their lives will be changed, then stewardship initiatives will reflect these attitudes.”<sup>1</sup>

If, on the other hand, we teach people that generosity is a spiritual discipline and that through giving they can nurture their relationship with God, then the results of such a theology of stewardship could be staggering. “Christian discipleship is Christian stewardship,” claims Lyle Shaller.<sup>2</sup> Instead of making people feel as if they *need* to give to the church out of a sense of obligation, they will give out of a sense of joy. Instead of making people feel *guilty* so that they will give to the church, they will give as an expression of thanksgiving that they have trouble containing. Instead of making people see stewardship as the *business* aspect of church life, they will see it (instead) as a spiritual discipline — like prayer, worship, and studying the Scriptures. This, I believe, is what the writer of Proverbs is hinting at when he or she speaks of “the world of the generous getting larger and larger”: the slogan of the United Church of Christ’s current Stewardship Campaign. It is a difference, really, of trusting the economy of God verses the market economy, which, let’s face it, is difficult to trust these days. Commenting on this verse, Dr. Raymond Van Leeuwen writes, “Generosity would seem to diminish one’s resources but, in God’s economy, [it] brings gain. To withhold more than is just, conversely, does not preserve wealth but brings lack.”<sup>3</sup>

In these times, which can be seen as the best of times as well as the worst of times (the worst of times for obvious financial reasons, but the best of times for the teaching moment it offers the church on responsible stewardship), during these times we have an opportunity to encourage our parishioners to give to something that will yield a return far more valuable than gold bullion, far more precious than stocks and bonds during a bull market, and far more lucrative than a piece of choice Manhattan real estate. Instead of investing in that which moth and rust will consume, we are encouraging them to give to the

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Durall, *Creating Congregations of Generous People* (Herndon: Alban Institute, 1999), 24.

<sup>2</sup> Lyle E. Shaller, *44 Ways to Expand the Financial Base of Your Congregation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “Proverbs” from *The New Interpreters Bible Commentary*, Volume V (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 119.

Church: a community of hope and salvation that makes manifest to them the very presence of the living God, the community that will hold them in the light of God's grace when every other institution in life seems to be crumbling around them. What blessing in life is more valuable (and more secure) than that, my friends?

And so, as you return to your congregations, or, as you on the National Staff travel across the country and preach to churches embarking on stewardship campaigns this fall, remind those who come to be fed that although times may be tough, it is also a time for growth — spiritual growth. By giving and trusting in God, God will provide — and the blessing that God will provide is a spiritual affection that will swell the heart with an assurance that God is closer than the breath that fills our lungs and the blood that courses through our veins. God is the very love that knits us into community. Thanks be to our God who speaks...and speaks still. Amen.