

**A Stewardship of Prayer
Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4
2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12
Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
Twenty-First Sunday in Pentecost
Reformation Sunday
Woodbury UMC
October 30, 2022**

Today is Reformation Sunday, so as Protestant Christians, it is an important day for us, and a reminder that we have lived through time when the church has been in great need of great reform. 505 years ago today, one annoyed monk very publicly shared a list of grievances, each ways that the church seemed in need of making a change. (Some might say we need constant reform. Is now one of those times?) Reform means to change something in order to improve it — and sometimes that can mean stripping away things that have accumulated over time, getting back to an original conception of how something should be.

We are also just four weeks out from Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday before Advent and typically serving as Stewardship Sunday, when we hand in our estimate of giving cards. Today I'm excited to begin a sermon series all about stewardship. Excited about stewardship? Yes, really! Excited, because the more I considered stewardship, the more I became convinced that the way we most often look at stewardship is in great need of reform. That's the theme of this series.

Both of our readings today are helpful in clarifying this reformed understanding of what stewardship is all about. In our Epistle, we have its beginning, with Paul, Silvanus and Timothy sending their greetings to the church in Thessalonika. Nothing too complicated: simply greetings being offered in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, praise for the faith that is growing among them despite afflictions and persecutions, and finally a reminder that they are always praying for them, asking that God will make them worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith.

Greetings, praise for keeping on despite adversity, and prayers for them. That's the first thing in this letter and most of the reading, so it seems important.

It is not a stretch to say that the message I want to give you today is a strong encouragement to pray for one another, to pray for our leaders who are keeping on despite all manner of adversity, and for God's guidance for them.

Here's why. I want us to pray for one another as if we deeply believed it was just as vital to the life of this congregation as is money — because it is. In our membership vows, we name 7 things — renouncing the spiritual forces of evil; accepting the power to resist them as given by God; the lordship of Jesus; to be faithful members of the church; to be loyal to Christ through the UMC; to receive and profess the Christian faith as contained in the scriptures

— that's six. The last one is To faithfully participate in the ministries of the church by supporting it with our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness.

That is Stewardship, and we spend time on it each year asking you to consider how you will support the church in the coming year. We need the money, that's no secret. But that is only 20% of what we have promised to dedicate to the work and vitality of this Christian congregation! There is also prayers, and presence, and service, and witness.

My thought is this — what if we treated prayers, presence, service and witness with the same great urgency as financial gifts, seeing each of these as essential to the survival and thriving of the congregation?

In a short while, you are going to received a mailing from the church office, written and signed by me, asking for you to pledge your support to this congregation for the next year. It is going to include a card on which you will write down the amount of your support, we do this every year. I haven't written it yet, I don't know what it will say. But what if the letter and card said: We know we have challenges, and we need you to pitch in — so what will be your Christian witness in the world, because we can't survive without it?

How often do you commit to showing up for others when they need you, both in attending church but by being there for people who need you? Do you pledge your service to others for the coming year, so that people who need help know they can count on you?

Or what if it said that we need you to commit to consistently uplifting people in prayer every week, the leaders of this congregation who are doing their work but need your encouragement, and that asking the Lord to strengthen and encourage them — well, there is no adequate substitute for prayer, nothing else will do.

There is a second reading this week, from Habakkuk. It is also pretty simple. In the first four verses, the prophet tells of how destruction and injustice is everywhere to be seen, and that even though he cries to God about what's happening, so that God may intervene — God never comes, and the wicked may flourish. It's actually the entire first chapter.

In the second half, from chapter 2, we have this powerful phrasing,

I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint.

And then these famous words:

the LORD answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it.

What's going on here is the evidence of his eyes says that calamity is everywhere and imminent — and his response is to get to a watchpoint and wait to see the Lord answer his complaint. Lament is being voiced — and

then hope is expressed in the prophet waiting for a response. “I will position myself on the fortress and keep watch. We are going to call for God, and I’m going to do my best to be on the lookout to see what God’s answer is.” If we are praying for vision and a future, are we keeping watch for what God’s answer is?

The lament is still there, and it is still real, but pointing out how bad things are in no way takes away from the hope. Laments and hope are intrinsically connected. They are not opposites.

We don’t read Habakkuk much. It only appears in our three-year lectionary cycle, one other time, as an alternate reading against Lamentations. Lament, and hope, with a gentle suggestion that we consider them together. That makes sense I think. Habakkuk does not end with resolution. It does seem to end with trust and faith. The watchman is still there, watching, in Faith, that there will be something to observe sooner or later.

Where does that get us? I am suggesting that we need to lament, and express to God when we see evil is winning. I suggest that the lament is closely tied with hope — we lament because we hope for a better future. I suggest that in both hope and lament we are calling out to God — and most of all, I suggest that in doing so we take seriously looking for God to show up, and for see what variety of answer God may present to us.

If we are praying for vision and a future, are we keeping watch for what God's answer is?

OK — if you are with me, then one question is what should we pray for God to do?

I am suggesting that praying for our church is not helping. Why? Because I think we need to be a whole lot more specific in our prayers. I want you to pray for Barb — she chairs two committees and contributes heavily in a third. Pray for Bud — we've completely rehabbed one property this year, and are completely revamping how we do Christian Education. Pray for Bud. Pray for Catherine — she's contributing to christian ed, and worship, and family nurture, and the cooperative parish, and other things. Pray for Bill and Judy Wilhelms, with thanks for all that Bill has put of himself into the congregation.

You see where I am going with this. Stewardship isn't only about the money, it is about the people who are doing the work, and praying God's strength for them. When we pray for this church, I urge you to pray for the people who are doing the heavy lifting. Make that a part of your weekly offering, pray with others and see what happens.

In the coming weeks I'm going to talk about the other four aspects of stewardship. For now, I want you to start off with an estimate of praying, like an estimate of giving. How often do you pray for one another? If it's not much, could you do a little more in the coming year? And if each of you did

this, then you follow the example of Habakkuk and look hard to see what God does — and you don't stop looking until you see the answer.

As Methodists, the history of the post-Reformation church is our history. You don't need to know a lot of church history or doctrine to recognize that after that moment, everything was different, and that moment informed everything that the church would do from then on. Let's consider what might be different in this congregation if we were to understand our stewardship as prayers, presence, service and witness in addition to our financial gifts. Let us be like the prophet in the watchtower, with a hope for our laments to be answered, and a powerful faith that there is an answer, and that our God will give it to us.

Christ the King Sunday is in a month. I urge you to use the next four weeks considering your witness, service, presence, and prayers, how you use them for the building up of this congregation.

We believe that if we give our money to the church, God will use it to do things we didn't think possible, in ways that never would have occurred to us. If you believe that, then what might God do with the other 80%?

Let's find out. Amen.