



I still remember one of the “gifts” from the congregation upon completing the whole Confirmation thing was this box that appeared to be rather similar to the ones my parents would receive every year. Inside that box were all these envelopes (again, rather similar to the ones my parents would fill out from time-to-time). I, eventually, put it together: it wasn’t a gift at all (at least, not to me)! Evidently, in the church’s “wise” eyes, I had become a big kid, an adult(ish) or some nonsense, capable of

making decisions and even contributing offerings! I don’t know what the church was thinking then. I don’t remember that being part of the deal, sitting through those classes with the pastor, sifting through the *Small Catechism* and the Bible, but nevertheless, there those white envelopes were, as if something had to be done with them...by not-quite-overly-mature me.

I would be lying if I told you I filled...*any* of those offering envelopes; actually, *any* offering envelope for several years. It’s not like I had a job when I affirmed my baptism anyway. No matter what the church thought of me that day, the rest of the world wasn’t quite ready to view me as anything remotely near the adult stratosphere. Sure, a few years later, I was bagging groceries and “facing shelves,” as they so called it (lining up the items on those grocery store shelves in a neat and orderly fashion, since, evidently, that makes consumers want to buy such items more), but my first priority was not about to be the offering Sunday morning when my paycheck came along every two Fridays. No, instead, it would be trips to the movie theater, junk food, gas (when I couldn’t get my parents to cover for it); you know...the essentials.

Somehow, someway, over time, I started to drop a five-dollar bill in the offering plate. I don’t believe my mom dropped a hint or anything (or maybe she did, but it was subtle enough that I don’t remember it at all). I think I just came to that conclusion myself: like it was the right thing to do or something. I didn’t think about where it was going: would it be used to pay the pastor’s salary, make sure the lights could be turned on for worship; that’s probably about all the costs I knew of regarding the overall church structure at that time in my life. I didn’t really think about those dollars potentially being used for some kind of outside ministry, from the food pantry in the annex basement to natural disasters anywhere around the world. I guess I didn’t need to know what was going to happen with *my* money to feel like it was the right thing to do, to put it in that offering plate at all.

And yes, it was *my* money! I earned it performing the most mind-numbing task imaginable lining up Campbell’s Tomato Soup cans with the product label facing out and putting the furthest-out expiration dates towards the back of the shelf; not to mention dealing with customers who wanted their groceries packed in a certain manner to their adult-version of Tetris satisfaction. Except, looking back, I must realize no paycheck would ever come unless it was for those...lovely customers. It’s almost as if this whole money thing is always rotating amongst “owners” between customers, businesses, employees, banks, churches and whatever/whomever else you wish to add to the list.

Yes, I’ve heard (perhaps even in one of those...lovely Confirmation classes) about God being the ultimate owner and us being the *stewards* of the money, the talents, the time, the land, the all-around gifts; but I guess I’ve never wanted to get God too close to the money part. Yes, I know

it's more so the *love* of money being the issue as opposed to the money itself, but still...something about it just didn't feel right. And it doesn't feel any more right now.

After all, it's rather ironic this first reading shows up in the midst of not just a virus pandemic, but economic and all-around resources pandemics, too, in a sense. Do we, as the church, really want to push forth a story from our Bible-collection shelf about people selling their possessions and goods, giving the resulting money to those in any need? After all, for plenty of desperate hearers/readers of any G(g)ood N(n)ews they can find nowadays, they have lost their fair share of goods already; or, at least, the values of those goods have taken a most monstrous hit. Can the church really keep advocating the stewardship-front with 401k's and pensions and whatever retirement accounts taking such a nose-dive, not to mention however many jobs lost or respective hours cut?

Except, some of the good news from the seekers of any good news themselves is that, for some, they're managing the all-arounds "goods" of life more efficiently, now (again...*some*). They're more aware of not having the time to spend with their respective families before, and they're taking full advantage of that precious opportunity now (granted, could be some stress-inducement along the way with that, too). They realize they don't need all that stuff they used to buy in excess, keeping an eye on those "goods" in a variety of forms a little differently now, while, also, realizing the need beyond their respective home: those who don't have a family to keep company with during a pandemic, those with minimal access to medical care and on and on we could go.

Yes, the times are tough in a variety of ways, including with our own goods and values thereof; and yet, the holy call remains to continue to pool our gifts, talents, etc., together for the sake of those in even more need. And yes, the church recognizes there are more ways to fulfill that call than stuffing the offering envelopes: donating to food pantries directly, to COVID-19 relief funds (which the ELCA has developed one as well), and plenty of other incredibly worthy causes.

Whatever we can do, however we can do it, God empowers us, still, for such life-altering ministry. It all began with the Resurrection, which we continue to celebrate, not just for our own personal salvation hope, but because that death-shattering miracle continues to thrive in each of us: to live in spite of a virus, in spite of fear, in spite of worrying over own goods alone. We can't help but share such death-shattering goodness with others. Christ shared it with us, and it will never, ever be taken away from us or from the whole world to enjoy. For that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen.