

I Peter 4:7-11

Richard J. Koch

The Power To Make A Difference

September 29, 1991

Text: *"As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, good stewards of God's varied grace."* (I Peter 4:10)

Surprise! If you thought Dr. Muth preached a stewardship sermon last week, you were right. If you thought, based on past experience, the Associate Minister never preaches a stewardship sermon, you were wrong. For better or worse (four words I've been saying a lot lately) I've been given stewardship sermon number 2 - so he said with an evil glint in his eye. In other words, I've come here to ask you for money. Nay, more than that, I appeal to you to share your many talents for the furthering of God's work through this church.

Standing up here today I'm kind of reminded of the story I heard about an Irishman who met his friend on the streets of Dublin. *"Terrence me boy, how nice it is t' see ye, 'specially since ye owe me ten-pound-six."* *"Eamon, me old friend, I know. I'll give ye the money first thing t'morrow."*

"T'morrow, t'morrow. It's procrastinatin' ye are Terrence. Last moonth, ye said ye didn't have th' money. Last week, ye swore ye simply could not pay. Last Friday, ye will recall, ye said ye were out of funds-"

Terrence cut in, *"Enough, Eamon. Are ye forgettin' that each toime I kept me word?!"*

Let us not forget the importance of the stewardship season. Unlike April fifteenth when our taxes are due and the power to retrieve them rests in the hands of the government, we have been given the total freedom and power to respond to God with the giving of our resources. God does not burden us, twist our arms, tax us, or resort to extortion. God has given us the perfect freedom within which we can creatively work for the good of the Kingdom.

Being a parent is a funny thing. Some of you are looking at me cross-eyed and wondering *"How can he use the words parent and funny in the same sentence?"* In a recent article Steve Berry notes that children have a large organ in their brains called the *instruction-diverter* which receives commands given by a parent through one ear and sends them immediately out the other at the speed of light. I concur with Steve Berry's hypothesis and have conducted experiments. I'll allow my two boys the freedom to play if only they promise to pick up their toys when done. *"Sure dad, uh-huh. We'll pick up our toys."* Later, when play time

is over and I ask them to clean up the mess should I be surprized to hear,
"But daddy, you said you were going to pick up our toys."

Jesus uses a parent image for God when he calls God, "abba" or "Father." (Actually, the real translation of "abba" is not "Father" it is "Daddy" and we can only suppose Jesus wanted us to be like little children in the arms of a loving parent. The ancient church, in its lofty wisdom, decided to make God more respectable. After all, can you imagine saying "Our Daddy who art in Heaven..." every Sunday morning?) Whatever the translation, I wonder if God has the same problem with us, God's children, as we do with our own. Do we take God for granted? Do we let God's commandments go in one ear and out the other? Think about it for a moment. How many times have you heard people tired of trying to make life work finally give themselves up to God and rest in the comfort of the Spirit? Over the years how many Christians have claimed to let God have control and have given all their power over to the Lord so that they might give up their evil ways? I've heard this kind of stuff a lot at camps, in college, in churches, and on television. I sort of wonder if these new children of God end up in some weird frame of mind that claims we're done, God is good, all our needs are met, and we don't have to worry anymore. It is then I imagine God walking into the living room of life where all these people are lounging around and asking, *"Hey, who's going to clean up this mess?"*

When we get feeling most comfortable in God's presence, I believe, we are gently reminded we are not entirely powerless. We cannot give up our responsibilities at the same time we give our lives to God. Paul tells us we are equipped by God to take on the challenges of the world. Jesus reminds us through his parables on stewardship and talents that we've been given much to use in this life to fight against evil, poverty, oppression, and those things that oppose righteousness. We have been given power; the power to make a difference. We are called by God to use that power to its fullest potential and the best of our ability. William Wordsworth wrote in his work Ecclesiastical Sonnets,

*"Give all thou canst;
 High heaven rejects the lore
 Of nicely-calculated less or more."*

Phoebe Cary adds:

*"Give plenty of what is given you,
 And listen to pity's call;
 Don't think the little you give is great
 And the much you get is small."*

St. Ignatius Loyola reminds us who we are serving with our gifts and talents. It is none other than the Lord our God who deserves the very best we have to offer.

*"Teach us, good Lord, to serve Thee as Thou
deservest:*

*To Give and not to count the cost;
To fight and not to heed the wounds;
To toil and not to seek for rest;
To labour and not ask for any reward
Save that of knowing that we do thy will."*

What kind of power do we have to make a difference right here at First Congregational Church? First of all and most obvious, we can enlarge our pledges to the church and help us get past the existing deficit budget which constricts our programs and presently provides a less than desired ministry to our members and community. Increased programs for the fastest growing segments of our population - senior citizens and youth - are on the drawing boards, but cannot be implemented without additional funding. Wider outreach to help improve conditions in our community are in the works, but countless people will go without benefit if we cannot come through with needed dollars. God has given us the power through our financial earnings and we can make a difference.

Secondly and often overlooked is our ability to provide ourselves and the personal talents we have to offer to make promising things begin to happen. Our boards and committees are always filled with dedicated and talented people who make this church function smoothly and efficiently. You too, can be a part of the team which provides the very best ministry possible to our members and friends. Furthermore, we have continual projects in the form of St. Vincent's meal program, Habitat for Humanity, Laubach Literacy, and many other opportunities in which already hundreds of our members have participated to bring a ray of hope to others less fortunate. God has given us the power through our personal talents to make a difference.

Lastly and just as importantly we need you to share with us your spiritual gifts. We need everyone's prayers of support and hope and encouragement that this body of believers maintains itself on the path of God's will. Though from differing backgrounds, Congregationalists have always sought God's will together. Paraphrasing Paul, let us pray for one another and the individual tasks we've been called to and let us pray without ceasing in order that our lives might always point toward the glory of God. God has given us the power of spiritual gifts to make a difference.

Our scripture lesson today came from the first letter of Peter to Christians in the northern part of Asia Minor; most of whom were converted Gentiles. The letter was written to encourage them in their

efforts to overcome their "fiery ordeal." In other words, they were being persecuted for their religious faith. Even through their unspeakable hardships and probable torture and death they are admonished to employ their gifts as good stewards. In the face of an uncertain outcome they continued to risk in their giving. What of we who are not persecuted and can worship freely? Have we not more gifts than they who struggled everyday to stay alive? Now comes our challenge. We are called to never forget, even in our opulence, that there is still a need for our stewardship and what a blessing it is for us to choose to give from our wealth and talents freely without being forced.

Finally, I have to add that being good stewards has its rewards. Of the many compensations which come our way one of the most blessed and comforting is knowing we are doing what we can to participate in God's Kingdom. A story I read recently about the rewards of good stewardship goes like this: *"After the morning sermon at the post chapel at Camp Roberts, California, a lanky redheaded soldier diffidently handed the chaplain an envelope, explaining he wanted to make a donation. 'We can always use the money to fix up the chapel,' approved the chaplain. But when the soldier drew out five \$10.00 bills, he said, 'That's a lot of money, isn't it, private?' The soldier shifted his weight, then blurted out, 'To tell the truth, sir, I won it.' 'Hm,' mused the chaplain. 'Don't you think it would be better to give it back to the men you won it from?' 'They've shipped out,' said the private. 'Well, I'll accept it then,' the chaplain agreed. Twice after that the soldier brought in similar donations, which the chaplain accepted after futile attempts to have the winnings restored to the losers. But when the soldier again showed up, this time with \$100.00, the chaplain decided to call a halt. 'Now, look here,' he said sharply, 'gambling is a mighty bad habit. And what's more, giving all your winnings to the church doesn't excuse it in the least.' 'Oh I'm not giving it all to the church,' the soldier hastily explained, 'I'm giving a tenth. After your swell sermon about the Lord providing when people tithe, I tried it. Boy, he sure does!'"*

In any case, let us give because we have been given the power to make a difference. I would like to add that one more way you can choose to use your power this stewardship season is by joining members of the Board of Stewardship at ten o'clock this morning in the Friendship Lounge or at a home host gathering at one of nine locations throughout the area. Dates and times are listed in a recent Congregationalist or at the front office. Hear what they have to say and exercise your power by responding to them with your comments, suggestions, talents and pledge. Whatever your ability, join all of us in our efforts to bring the rewards of increased stewardship to the ministry of First Congregational Church. In this way we are truly servants of God and the needs of humanity. Amen.