**Next Steps to Risk Taking Discipleship**

**Anchored in Hope: Next Steps in Faithful Giving**

**Nehemiah 10:35-37 and Mark 12:41-44**

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Thursday morning, we once again woke up to the news of a mass shooting - this one in a country and western bar that caters to college students in Thousand Oaks, California. Fourteen people were killed, at least a dozen more injured. This came less than two weeks after the shooting of eleven Jews as they worshiped in their synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. As Pastor Nick pointed out in his sermon a couple of weeks ago, 2018 has been a difficult year in a lot of ways. Hurricanes, politics, sexual assault allegations, trade wars, immigrant children separated from their families, opioid deaths, 7000 migrants making their way north to escape violence and poverty, wildfires wiping out whole communities. So many events that leave us grieving, leave us angry, leave us searching for hope.

Now, let me contrast all that news from 2018 in our country with 2018 here at First United Methodist Church of Ann Arbor. Here are a few fun facts about things that have happened here in the last year. Did you know that last year’s sixth graders made over 700 dinners for kids in after-school programs at Bryant, Hikone, and Green Baxter Court community centers? Or that we sent 67 youth and adults on mission trips to inner city Philadelphia and northern Michigan last summer? Or that just this past week, on election day, our youth put in 120 volunteer hours helping out at Cass Community Social Services in Detroit?

Meanwhile, our visitation team made nearly 100 visits to elderly people in the congregation who no longer are able to come to church, and Uncommon Threads made dozens of prayer shawls and quilts that were given to congregation members in need including a newborn in the NICU, a teenager struggling with depression, an elderly person who had a joint replacement, a ten-year-old who had emergency surgery, and a person in their 90s who requires oxygen and is confined to their home.

Each week, our children’s and adult choirs - choral and bells - have provided us with music for worship. And each month, adults in our congregation have spent about 800 hours in faith formation classes learning about racism and the church, hunger in America, science and religion, how other people live and practice their faith as well as the Bible and Methodism. One of those classes, Mind the Gap, organized us to write more than 50 letters to congress encouraging them to act to end hunger and food insecurity in our country.

And then there are our outreach and mission projects. Our best guess is that volunteers with Love Thy Neighbor made over 3000 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for food insecure people in Ann Arbor last year. Every week of the year, they took those sandwiches as well as canned food donations to distribute early in the morning at Saint Andrews. 3000 sandwiches and, we guess, about 12 tons of canned goods.

Of course, last week was our third week this year at Alpha House where, during 2018, our church has provided 675 meals to 42 homeless families plus stocked the Alpha House pantry three times with everything from diapers to rock salt.

Forty volunteers from our church helped renovate two more homes with Habitat for Humanity during the summer and, as a congregation, we donated $16,000 toward building supplies for those homes. We also grew vegetables for Food Gatherers and walked in the CROP walk to raise money to fight hunger locally and globally.

I could go on and on with this list. I haven’t even told you how many Kenyan children we’ve helped to feed or how many solar lamps we’ve provided so Kenyan teens could study at night. Nor have I mentioned that before 2018 is out, we are likely to have given 500 Christmas gifts to lower income families in Ann Arbor. Oh, and there is also that our Immigrant Hospitality Team has raised funds to support immigrants in sanctuary at churches in Detroit, Kalamazoo, and now here in Ann Arbor.

I tell you all of this because I want you to recognize that this church, our church, our congregation, the children, teenagers, and adults who make up our church family - we make a real difference in the world. The world is a better place because we’re here. And we are better people because of what we do out there.

For the last several weeks, we have been in a sermon series I’ve called Anchored in Hope. Throughout history, we, the church, have offered hope in even the bleakest of times. That is our calling, and we keep doing it, we stay hopeful, we make an impact, by continuing to grow in our own faith. Growing in faith takes commitment to something bigger than ourselves and determination to do good in the world, so I have asked you to choose a next step that you will take in your worship and prayer life, in your knowledge of God, scripture, and faith, in your service and your witness, and today in your financial giving.

All of the good things that we do as a church can only happen when we all help support them. We don’t receive funds from our denomination or any other outside organization. We are self-sustaining - everything we do is supported by the money you give.

And, we are an incredibly generous congregation - always ready to give to our mission and outreach projects. But, those things don’t happen unless we give generously to the annual budget of the church, as well. The youth can’t serve in Detroit without youth directors to organize their trip. Love Thy Neighbor can’t make sandwiches for food insecure people without a licensed kitchen to make them in. We can’t grow vegetables for FoodGatherers without land to grow it on. We can’t have worship or small groups, concerts or Connections, we can’t provide meeting space for AA or the Boys Scouts, if we don’t have electricity, heat, and a roof over our buildings.

Our operating budget is approximately 1.3 million dollars per year. That doesn’t include money that goes to our mission and service projects. That is what it takes to maintain the church. The two biggest line items are staffing costs and the cost of caring for four buildings. The church employs 23 people, most of whom are part time. They do everything from providing nursery care on Sunday to cleaning and maintaining the buildings to answering phones and creating bulletins to programming, education, congregational care, preaching, music and administration. Our building costs include $10,000/month in a mortgage payment, $26,000 a year to heat the downtown church and $24,000 a year for electricity and water. Oh, and we pay $10,000 a year in postage, paper, and supplies.

All of that enables our church to continue to do all the great things in the world that I talked about a few minutes ago - and God knows, the world needs what we are doing. But, the unfortunate truth is that giving to our operating costs and mortgage has gone down steadily over the last few years. We ended our last fiscal year in the red, and already this fiscal year, which started July 1, we are already about $60,000 behind where we should be to meet our budget.

So, of course, that is one reason I’d like to see each of you increase your giving or start giving this year. But, there are important spiritual reasons to give, as well. Giving to God is a spiritual discipline. In our faith tradition, the expectation of giving back to God started with Abraham. From almost the beginning, the Jews understood that they should give ten percent, a tithe, of everything they had as an acknowledgement that everything we have comes from God. Giving is an expression of gratitude, a way of saying thank you for my life, my family, my home, food to eat, and an amazing world in which to live.

Now, for a lot of us, giving 10 percent is difficult. It’s something we might work toward, but it’s not possible right now. Yet, one thing we all can do is what Nehemiah says-give God our first fruits. In other words, give to God first, then pay bills, and then see what you have for discretionary spending and giving to other charities.

The other spiritual reason for giving is that it leads us to consider what is really important, what really matters, and then to sacrifice some of our abundance for the needs of the world. When we do that, we not only feel good about putting our money toward the things that matter, but we also learn to trust that God will take care of us when we do. Like the widow in the temple who gives everything she has, we give abundantly to God’s kingdom and trust that God will be there for us.

So, what can be your next step in financial giving? I am asking each of you to choose one step that you can take in doing a little bit more. f you’re not giving now, start giving. Decide on an amount to give to God first and then plan the rest of your budget. If you don’t already pledge, consider making a pledge this year so you’ve made a commitment to yourself, to God, and to the church. If you don’t give electronically, sign up for electronic giving so you never miss paying on your pledge. If you’re not sure how much to increase what you give, consider an increase of a certain percentage - 1, 5, 10, 20 percent, maybe more. Perhaps you could increase by the rate of inflation - expected to be about 2% this year. Another option is to give a portion of your most recent raise. Or perhaps ask yourself how you can simplify your life or what you might sacrifice so you can be more generous. What could you give up to support the church? If you and your family always order pizza on Friday night, consider giving that money to church instead. Skip your daily stop at Starbucks. Or here is one other way to think about it... if every giver increased their giving by an average of $600 a year, $50 a month, we would comfortably make our budget. You could use that number.

Ultimately, our giving reflects what we believe in, what we hope for, what we think really matters. Homes for homeless people, food for the hungry, Christian education for our children, justice for all people. This week, you should have received a pledge card in the mail. If not, you can pick one up as you leave today. Take some time this week to prayerfully consider what your next step in giving will be. When you come back next week, bring your pledge card with you. We will consecrate and celebrate our gifts to God. Each of us will place our card on the altar as a way of saying, “I believe in what God is doing through my church in the world. I believe in the future, and I’m willing to take a next step to invest in hope.”

May it be so.
 Amen.