

Proper 22A – Stewardship
October 5, 2008 – Rev. Jennifer Adams

There's a funny preacher ritual that I want to tell you about this morning. As stewardship pledge drives approach we preachers light candles and collectively we pray to the lectionary gods and we pray hard that the lessons during the pledge drive will at least have something to do with abundant and joyful giving. (Now deep down we realize that the lessons are on a three-year cycle that we can actually look up ahead of time but there is something to the collective wish that comes from deep down in our preacher hearts as we believe that we might actually effect the readings that happen to pop up in early to mid October.) Well, what we have this week, is a testament to something, but I'm not sure what: a landowner who leases his vineyard to tenants, goes away and then sends slaves in to collect the produce. And those slaves get beaten, stoned, kicked out and some of them are killed and then more slaves are sent and the same things happen and then the landowner sends his Son and the tenants scheme and the Son is killed and the reading ends with Jesus saying that the kingdom of God will be taken from those who don't produce fruit and given to those who do? Hmmm... *please? . . . give to Grace?*

But actually this week as it turned out the lectionary is the least of our worries. We are talking about pledging while the headlines are proclaiming one monumental plummet after another. We're talking about the significant commitments needed to hit our appropriate yet challenging budget while the newscasters told us this week that the unemployment rate stays high while housing values stay low. We are talking about increasing our goals while the news daily proclaims the decrease in value of as far as I can tell, just about everything on Wall Street.

And so why are we talking about financial pledging? Let's start with it that basic and take it from there: Stewardship Commission decided that our theme for this year's pledge drive would be 'Amazing Grace' and so over the course of this month you'll be hearing various ways that various people respond to the question "What do you find amazing about Grace Church?" You'll hear from Grace Church families, from youth who have recently returned from pilgrimage, from one of the mentors who worked with Michele over the last two years as her family moved from the City Mission to one of our Grace houses to their new Habitat for

Humanity home. And you'll hear from each other if you take the opportunity to respond out in the Commons to that question about our community's amazing-ness.

As a Commission, as we considered the ways in which this congregation is amazing - it became clear that we need to talk about pledging because the world needs more of this – more Grace – more of a community that welcomes all, that reaches out to feed, that offers shelter and care and music and prayer and peace and opportunities for faithful searching and participation in works of justice and that provides companions for the journey we're all on. While the headlines spark fear and report decline we minister to the hurt, we witness to a gentle, ongoing courage, and we report growth. The world needs more Grace. I think it's that simple and if that wasn't obvious six months ago it certainly is now.

Financial stewardship, actually all branches of stewardship are related to the kind of presence we are able to be in the world. Stewardship means “the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care.” We have been given the gift of Grace Church even while we are Grace Church and financial giving is one of the ways we support our care of one another, this place and the things that happen here. Pledging does a lot of things. It pays heating bills and phone bills and staff salaries for 8 people. It provides curriculum for kids and youth, training for leaders and programs for Adult Formation. Pledges keep the lights on, contribute to the ongoing training of our Stephen Ministers, provide music for the choir, care of the organ, oil for the candles, and pledges help maintain our Grace houses which currently serve as home to two previously homeless families with 8 kids between them. Pledges this year will help us pay for our new boiler (not very exciting, I admit – but it is warm). A new boiler that just last week replaced the over 30 year old heating system that was on it's last legs, and heated so abundantly that it not only provided enough heat for this building but according to our energy survey it produced enough heat (wasted enough heat) to keep two or three additional houses warm too. Pledges allowed for high school youth to go on pilgrimage, gave scholarships to kids attending diocesan youth camps and allowed us to give to outreach organizations such as Episcopal Relief and Development, Community Action House, The Center for Women in Transition, Evergreen Commons, the Boys and Girls Club, Migrant Ministries and others. And through those organizations and other giving too we helped hurricane victims, victims of the economy, families

in Kenya, children of the Grace Christian Child Care Center and people who stand in line for food at the Community Kitchen here in Holland.

And that's a small percentage of what pledges do and when you put it like that, it's truly amazing what happens here at Grace. Not just the quantity of what happens but the quality of what happens here at Grace. We are a presence that needs to be cared for and grown because we have been given the opportunity to be good news in a world that is hungry for such goodness and light. Unlike the news, we're not talking about fear or decline; we're responding to it as we talking about living and thriving in a way that with steadiness, courage and strength spreads the good news of Christ to a hungry and hurting world. We're talking about pledging because according to the headlines, the world needs more of this. It's even more important now.

Oh, and here's the tie-in with the gospel. I didn't stop praying after the initial shock. Through all of what happens here and through all of those who gather here - Grace continues to be the cornerstone that it has for over 150 years, a foundation for each of us, for all of us and even for some people whom we'll never meet. Sometimes that cornerstone is a place to lay your head and rest. Other times this a place from which to leap. Sometimes Grace is safe-haven for recovery or healing - other times Grace is a place to be challenged to stretch and to grow. While the day-to-day in the vineyard can be tough, even threatening at times, especially for those who have been asked to collect the produce – the foundation we've inherited is strong and fruit producing and kingdom building.

We know that times are hard, harder for some than for others; the goal we've set this year is a communal goal (you'll hear a little more at announcement time) and you can watch each week, beginning next Sunday to see how close we've come. And when we hit that goal, we'll celebrate together. As you pledge know that every gift, regardless of size matters and that in itself is amazing – every gift matters because every gift contributes to the foundation of our caring for one another, this place and our world.

Amen.