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January 11, 2015  
Theme: Stuff  
Sermon: The Stuff of Life

**Call to Worship:**

Our January worship theme is “Stuff.”

George Carlin said that life is all about finding a place for our stuff: that our houses are just places where we keep our stuff, a pile of stuff with a cover on it; and that when we are up in an airplane and look down, when we see those rooftops, we are really just seeing everyone’s little piles of stuff.

Stewardship is, in part, figuring out what stuff really matters to you. “Where your treasure is, there your heart is also.” (Matthew 6:21)

After all, this pile of stuff, right here—has meant a lot, to a lot of people, for going on 175 years.

And so let us seek together the stuff of life,  
our hearts and our treasure;  
and let us worship together.

**Reading: “Welcome Morning” by Anne Sexton**

There is joy  
in all:  
in the hair I brush each morning,  
in the Cannon towel, newly washed,  
that I rub my body with each morning,  
in the chapel of eggs I cook  
each morning,  
in the outcry from the kettle  
that heats my coffee  
each morning,  
in the spoon and the chair  
that cry “hello there, Anne”  
each morning,  
in the godhead of the table  
that I set my silver, plate, cup upon  
each morning.

All this is God,  
right here in my pea-green house  
each morning

and I mean,  
though often forget,  
to give thanks,  
to faint down by the kitchen table  
in a prayer of rejoicing  
as the holy birds at the kitchen window  
peck into their marriage of seeds.

So while I think of it,  
let me paint a thank-you on my palm  
for this God, this laughter of the morning,  
lest it go unspoken.

The Joy that isn't shared, I've heard,  
dies young.

### **Sermon: The Stuff of Life**

There is joy in all... even the stewardship sermon, I hope.

Because it is time once again, to give the Sermon on the Amount!

The Amount, as it turns out, is almost 2/3 of the way to being raised; our Stewardship team spends all of December and early January in the “silent phase” of Stewardship, asking lay leaders who serve on the Program Council and Board and others to pledge early—so we've already raised about \$272,000.

Pretty good for a pledge drive that just went public a few days ago!

The fact is that everything in this world costs money...  
even the things that are priceless.  
This community is priceless.  
Without you, this church would just be a building.

And if we didn't have the money that all the people in this church give, each year,  
we wouldn't even have a building,  
let alone the staff who work with all the members of the community to create and sustain  
the programming.

And so each year we *will* this community into existence,  
by acknowledging, and even celebrating,  
that the priceless has a price, and it is up to us to pay for it.

The money doesn't just float down from heaven, like God's manna—even if we might  
wish it would.

A few years ago I saw an AP news story about a man who tried to make that happen.

21-year-old [Kevin Russell] was arrested after he tried to cash a check for \$50,000 at the Chase Bank in Hobart, [Indiana] that was signed

“King Savior, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Servant.”

Russell had several other checks with him that were signed the same way but made out in different dollar amounts, including one for \$100,000.

[Detective Jeff White said in response to the incident] “I’ve heard about God giving out eternal life, but this is the first time I’ve heard of him giving out cash.”<sup>1</sup>

Kevin Russell, I hear ya. If things were that easy—well, I’d still be here right now—but I’d be wearing new shoes.

Talking about stewardship can get abstract, but it really comes down to very practical decisions. So I always like to talk about what my husband Ben and I pledge and how we got there.

Last year, we hadn’t been here during the pledge drive the year before, but of course we didn’t need to have made an earlier pledge to start giving! So over the course of last year, 2013-2014 church year, we gave \$2500.

Last winter, as stewardship begin, I really wanted to ramp it up for the next pledge year (this year). I had fallen in love hard with this place and all the people, and I wanted to be truly as generous as I could be.

So, as I told you last year, Ben and I considered childcare costs, our mortgage, the retirement savings, the college savings, and taxes. And of course there was all the *stuff* that would be nice to have, as we were furnishing our new house.

One thing in particular I had been wanting was new bedside tables...ones that matched...and actually had drawers and could hold things, one that had room for not only a lamp but the huge stack of books I’m always in the middle of, and that maybe looked a little better than the ones that Ben had gotten for free off Craigslist in 1998.

In our “honey, let’s figure out our pledge” conversation last year, I told Ben I wanted to increase our giving by 20%, or \$500 dollars: from \$2500 to \$3,000.

And he looked at me and said, “We can either increase the pledge 20%...or get new bedside tables.”

Well the answer was easy.

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<sup>1</sup> AP Report, March 1, 2007. <http://apnews.myway.com/article/20070301/D8NJBBQ00.html>

As I said, when I think about my life, I would rather say, “I am as generous as I can be to my church” than say “I am a person with matching bedside tables.”

Generosity is a very *practical* spiritual practice. Generosity isn’t just about intentions or hopes...it is about what we actually DO.

One church consultant, a UU named Michael Durall, has said that:

Charitable giving should make some difference in how we as religious people experience life from day to day. If [you give] and never notice the difference, your giving has too little meaning for you or for your church. ... “Charitable giving should change your life in some way.”<sup>2</sup>

It may be a very tiny life change, but I thought about my pledge and my promise pretty much every time I looked at my tiny bedside table, cowering under its pile of books. And I felt proud of my choice.

But I promise I will always be honest with you, my dear people and so I will admit, despite my better angels: I still wanted new bedside tables.

Or at least *one* new one...for me.  
I may have done a little late night websurfing...  
a little covetous window-shopping...  
but I stayed the course.

Because new stuff is really expensive...and I had made a promise.

And then came the East Village Fair. Our annual fair of which one component is...a used furniture sale.

Well. There were a lot of lovely items there. But what caught my eye was a small 3 drawer dresser...exactly what I had been thinking of for my bedside table. It was unfinished pine, and it looked like maybe it had gotten wet on the bottom at some point, and there was some cracking and stains here and there. But I tell you, the price was right. I paid my \$25 and got it out of there.

Over the next month or so, when I had spare time,  
I cleaned it.  
Then I sanded it.  
Then I spent \$7 on a pint of white paint.  
Then I gave it about 50 coats until it was smooth and shiny.  
Then, to my amazement and delight, Santa gave me pretty new handpainted ceramic knobs to put on the dresser that I think he got from Etsy.

And goshdarnit, I have my new bedside table, and it cost \$32 plus a Christmas gift.

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<sup>2</sup> Durall, *Creating Congregations of Generous People*, 38. He quotes Sylvia Nardoni.

What can I tell you: the heart wants what it wants.

It was actually a really fun project.

In work like mine, it can feel good to do something that yields such tangible results.

And every time I look at it and open its drawers, I think about why I have it: because I want to be a generous person, and I want to practice what I preach, and because my promise really did change my life and my choices. I still can't say: "I am a person with matching bedside tables" but I can say: "I am as generous as I can be to my church." It feels good.

Ben still has his old bedside table but...it doesn't seem to bother him.

So this year, I knew we couldn't take our \$3,000 pledge a lot higher. That really is about as good as it gets for us, at this stage in our lives.

But I didn't want to leave it flat, because I finally figured out how Cost of Living and inflation works.

I am a grown-up who took Calculus in high school but it took me until this year to really figure out that if you keep a financial number the same over time, it is just as though you have decreased that number. The amount is the same but it is worth less.

I realized if I kept our pledge at \$3000, it would be as though we had decreased our pledge. I didn't want that.

The cost of living increase determined by our federal government this year is 1.7%. I rounded that up to 2%. 2% of \$3000 is \$60. So that would be a pledge increase of \$60, or an extra 5 bucks a month, \$3060 for the year.

And I looked at that number and it just seemed a little skimpy to me. I figured if I could raise my pledge by \$5 a month I could raise it by \$10 a month.

Maybe I would forgo a new sweater, or I'd serve the family leftovers a couple nights instead of ordering pizza. There's always some way to cut.

So that is why this year Ben and I are pledging \$3,120. That is a double cost of living increase, or 4% increase, from our pledge last year.

Ben does not love these conversations. But he does love me, and he does love Follen—we both love Follen. And it feels good to take care of the people and place we love. You gave us a new life, a new ministry, a new community; and we are so grateful and joyful.

The Joy that isn't shared, I've heard,  
dies young.

There is joy in all:

in the Program Council meetings where there are always good snacks and good discussion;

In the Board meetings that never go overtime;

In the Worship and Music Action team meetings where we debate the theological implications of clapping vs. shouting Amen!

There is joy in the staff that give their all, day in and day out, with warmth and devotion and skill and humility and humor;

in the one-on-one pastoral conversations I have with people in my office, as we sit in comfy chairs and share deeply from our personal and spiritual experience.

There is joy in the kind sympathy cards I got when I told you my grandfather died—to know my family was in your thoughts and prayers was a true blessing to me.

There is joy in these eight walls and clear windows that let in the slanting winter sunlight,

joy and gratitude for the people, long gone,  
who never knew us, yet who loved us enough  
to give us a place of sanctuary.

There is joy in knowing we can uphold and bequeath that same gift to those who will come after us.

There is even joy in the emails: the many, many, many emails.  
There is truly joy in all.

All this is God,  
right here in our octagonal house  
this morning.  
Let us raise up  
a prayer of rejoicing  
let us paint a thank-you on our palms  
let us write a thank-you in our checkbooks!  
For this priceless community, this laughter of the morning.

The Joy that isn't shared, I've heard,  
dies young.  
And so I pray:  
May we share our joys with generous hearts,  
And grow our church another year older.

*Amen.*