

United Church Of Christ

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“Stewardship: It’s Organic”
Psalm 116, Matthew 25: 14-30

(Holding up a church financial pledge card and an organ donor card.)

These are two cards of stewardship and commitment. One of them is important; the other is essential. They both are expressions of thankfulness to God for God’s gift and grace. One of these cards sustains an organization: its material necessities of life together with its opportunities for ministry and mission. The other gives, sustains, and enhances life itself.

Soon you will receive one of these church pledge cards. Filling it out is a conventional once-a-year act of stewardship, pledging the usual commitments of “time, treasure, talent” to the church. It is an important expression of gratitude and faith.

Today you can pick up one of these organ/tissue donor cards after worship. Filling it out is also an act of gratitude and faith, suffused with compassion. It is a commitment that re-arranges the boundaries of our understanding of stewardship. Today’s Gospel lesson and our resurrection faith compel us to consider stewardship as a way of life and living, even into our dying and death.

In light of Jesus’ parable of the talents, I would suggest that stewardship is more about cultivation than conservation. Usually, when we use the term “stewardship” we use it in regard to responsible use of resources. How do we not squander that which has been entrusted to us, either individually or as a community? How do we conserve our dollars, our church building, our energy wisely? That is often the question. It extends to ourselves, our bodies. Good stewardship of ourselves is usually seen as taking care of our bodies – eating right, getting both rest and exercise, and the like – conserving our physical (and mental and emotional) well being.

But the parable of the talents points us beyond conservation to cultivation. Those servants who are blessed, who enter into joy, are those who risked, who went beyond the safe measure. Stewardship then becomes wise, if not sometimes risky, use of our resources and gifts for enhancement rather than hoarding. We are to create increase where there has been scarcity. Give life and growth in place of fallowness and futility. Provide hope and possibility in place of despair and desperation. To mission, to ministry, to persons unknown.

One individual donor can potentially provide organs, bone and tissue (such as corneas, tendons, ligaments) for up to 50 or more people in need. As of August 2003, there are over 80,000 Americans registered with the United Network for Organ Sharing waiting list. A new name is added to the list every 13 minutes, and every year an estimated 6,100 people die while waiting for organ transplants.

“Ah,” you say, “who would want anything from me? I’m too old, too worn out, in just plain bad shape. Let someone else do it.” Consider this: there is no age limit on organ donation. In one case, the liver from an 83-year-old woman was transplanted to a 57-year-old. But of more concern is that the “someone else’s” are not making donations. In 1986, 4,000 people donated organs after death and in 1995, only 4,891 people donated - an increase of less than 100 donors per year. [In 2001 there were 6,185 deceased donors and 6,607 living donors people who became donors, which is an increase of 1,281 donors from 2001, mostly due to the increase in living donation.] Such figures echo the words of the Psalmist: “I said in my consternation, “[People] are all a vain hope.”

(Ps. 116:11) If we “let someone else do it,” we are a vain hope to those whose lives could be save, whose living could be enhance through transplants.

I think of Rich. A devoted husband and father in his 30s. He was a member of my first church in Maine. An accountant of some sort, who worked with figures – very bottom line type guy. I remember being at a stewardship seminar with him, and his excitement as we explored understandings of stewardship that went beyond the bottom line to how we live our lives in faith and thankfulness. Several years later, after I had left that church, I was shocked to hear that Rich had been diagnosed with liver cancer. Word was that all other treatments had been futile and he was awaiting a transplant. It never came. Now I don't know about the medical details of a transplant in his situation, but I do know that he never even had the chance. The “someone else” whose donor decision might have helped wasn't there. We can't leave organ and tissue donation “to someone else” because each of us is called to accountability for how we use our resources, our lives, and our bodies – even beyond life itself.

If we understand stewardship as giving increase and life, hope and possibility, then signing an organ/tissue donor card is a natural act of faith and thankfulness. Even if you feel your kidneys, corneas, or whatever would not be acceptable, let the medical experts make that decision. And discuss organ/tissue donation with your family and friends.

“Oh,” you say, “I couldn't do that. It's so morbid. I don't even want to think about it.” Yet I would say to you: could you look in the face of baby Sheyenne, who received a heart transplant when she was two hours old, then into the face of her parents, and say: “Oh, it's just too morbid.” Could you look into the eyes of the parents who made the decision to give life from their baby's death and say to them, “Oh, it's too morbid.” What is a matter of morbidness and aversion to some is a matter of hope and life to others. Consider these words from a piece by Robert Test, entitled: “To Remember Me:

Give my sight to the man who has never seen a sunrise, a baby's face, or love in the eyes of a woman.

Give my heart to a person whose own heart has caused nothing but endless days of pain.

Give my blood to the teenager who was pulled from the wreckage of his car, so that he might live to see his grandchildren play.

Give my kidneys to one who depends on a machine to exist from week to week.

Take my bones, every muscle, every fiber and nerve in my body and find a way to make a crippled child walk.

Explore every corner of my brain. Take my cells, if necessary, and let them grow so that, someday, a speechless boy will shout at the crack of a bat and a deaf girl will hear the sound of rain against her window...

Of you must bury something, let it be my faults, my weaknesses and all prejudice against my fellow man.

Give my sins to the devil. Give my soul to God.

If, by chance, you wish to remember me, do it with a kind deed or word to someone who needs you.

If you do all I have asked, I will live forever.

Choosing organ/tissue donation then informs our understanding of stewardship. We are entrusted with life and the means for it for others beyond ourselves. When we sign this donor card, our stewardship is an action that flows not from convention but from compassion. We no longer simply conserve ourselves but cultivate hope and life, that glorifies and gives thanks to the Creator of life, the living Christ, and the renewing Spirit.

(Close with prayer.)