

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 22—Year C—Annual Giving
Lamentations 1:1-6
Lamentations 3:19-26
2 Timothy 1:1-14
Luke 17:5-10

Today is our third Sunday in our Annual Giving Season. Week one, we shared the *Celebrating a Year in the Life of St. Luke's* video. Last week, we heard from four laypeople—Jacque Dunbar, David Curry, Jim Shine, and Maggie Tilley. And today, they pass the baton to me to reflect on the practice of giving.

When we come to this time of year, there are always two questions we need to answer:

- *Why give?*
- *And why give to St. Luke's?*

And we have to wrestle with the first question before we ever address the second.

I love the rhythm of the church year—the quiet and expectation of Advent, the wonder of Christmas, the soul-stripping nature of Lent, the sheer force of life that bursts in Easter, the missional nature of Pentecost, and the long stretches of ordinary time when we're simply figuring out how to follow Jesus amidst the ordinary stuff of our lives. These chunks of time call us to reflect with intentionality on these different seasons that we live through in our lives, and we need them annually because our lives are cyclical—letting go and dying, rising and being born anew.

Our Annual Giving Season is another one of these annual seasons that we need. It provides the chance to check in with God and with our souls about how we are dancing in the flow, and I don't just mean the flow of money—that's just the outward and visible sign—but I mean that much more inward and spiritual grace—how are we dancing in the flow of divine power and love?

At the heart of God lies the reality that love is relational and that this love is meant to be received *and* poured out—not held, not hoarded, not stored, but poured out. Think waterwheel—the bucket receives *and* pours and that generates energy and that makes the wheel go. How are we receiving this spring of divine life and love? How are we pouring it out? How are we participating in and stewarding the power of this flow?

This is about so much more than our money—this is about our life. This is about our gifts and our passions; this is about how and where we spend precious time. This is about, as Mary Oliver says so well in the poem *The Summer Day*, “*What is it that you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?*” brought down into the nitty gritty details of our daily lives. And sometimes, it's discovering how to fully receive the beauty that Oliver found **kneeling down in the grass**” and “**strolling through the fields**” *and* how to pour that beauty back out into the world, maybe with an exhale of contentment or joy.

And here's the thing about flow, “not good” things happen when it stops. Water goes stagnant; things get stuck; there's no power and no motion. Richard Rohr defines sin as **anything that blocks the flow**, and blocking the flow in one place tends to bleed over into other parts of our lives.

Think about how resentment blocks the flow of love, and then how it metastasizes and possesses us and poisons all of our interactions.

Think about how fear blocks the flow and makes it so hard to trust and step out with the unshakeable courage that Jesus embodies and how that fear spreads like wildfire touching everything in its path.

Think about how the pervasive “not enough” that permeates our society blocks the flow of love and power that is always enough, that is always “**more than we can ask or imagine,**” “**more than we desire or deserve**” in the language of our prayers, and how that “not enoughness” robs us of the deep security that is grounded in God’s provision.

Think about how deadening it is when the flow of creativity gets blocked and the sparks of life that fire passion don’t get a chance to breathe and catch.

So, this is way bigger than money, AND it is also about money because money is one of those places where we touch some of our biggest fears and anxieties. These fears and anxieties can move us from a *transformational* spiritual journey to a *transactional* life where we *trade* our time, our passion, our gifts *in exchange for* the promise of financial security. This shift brings a lot of baggage and lots of temptation, and things can really start to go sideways—we can find ourselves filled with worry; we might start to focus on accumulation, even hoarding; we start to believe we “own” things; and more and more, we seek to exercise power and control—and NONE of these are about living in the flow.

Why give? Because, as Maggie Tilley said so beautifully last week, it’s how we respond to the extravagant love of God. We give because we receive so much, and when all that love and power and gifts and grace are flowing toward you and into you, pouring it back out is how we keep the love flowing. Doing the same with our money keeps us out of a transactional way of life that just kills our souls *and* keeps us living in this flow of blessings.

Giving is a way of acknowledging, as Jim Shine reminded us last week, those words we pray every Sunday, “**All things come of Thee, O Lord; and of Thine own have we given Thee.**”

Giving money keeps me in right relationship to it and allows money to remain an instrument of grace, and not an idol to be worshiped; giving money allows it to be a sacramental sign of this amazing flow, but neither the Source nor end goal of my life; giving money reminds me that my wholeness, my salvation, doesn’t rest in money but in the *overflowing, always* flowing love, power, and provision of God.

This Annual Giving Season allows all of us to check in with how we understand money, its purpose, and its hold on us, and allows us to reflect upon the flow—where are we participating in it and where is it blocked?

Once we come to terms with our need to give, then the question becomes *where do we give?* We can give our money, our time, our gifts and passions any number of places, and I have never held to a “all your giving needs to be to the church” frame. We have always taught that wherever you see God’s work being done, by all means bless it with your time, your talents, your presence and your money—all the places you give are a part of your tithe.

Wherever you give, **be intentional**—understand *why* you are giving *where* you are giving and *how* giving there helps you live more deeply in the flow, and that’s where there is a powerful case to be made for giving to St. Luke’s.

Last week, Jacque Dunbar drew our attention to the *Celebrating a Year in the Life of St. Luke’s* video and all the things going on in and through our community. There is no question that church has felt different

during the pandemic, and there is certainly grief that it doesn't feel quite the same, and yet, that video reminded us of all the ways life and love have continued to flow, all the ways that we have continued to connect and follow Jesus, all the ways that we have continued to love God and our neighbor—the virus did not stop the flow.

And David Curry gave voice to the strength of this community—that he and Susan could feel that community even when it took almost a year before they were actually in the physical space—that's remarkable—and how the sense of community has only grown.

Our passage from **Lamentations** this morning paints a picture of a world that is on fire and a sense of exile from all that is familiar, and yet, even with “**soul bowed down**” can proclaim this: **The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning, great is your faithfulness. “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.”**

When the world feels like it's burning down, where else can we go and hear, pray, sing the hope that grounds us in a deeper place? Where else reminds us of this deeper story?

When **Paul in II Timothy** speaks of the **faith that lived first in Timothy's grandmother Lois and then in his mother Eunice and now lives in him and reminds Timothy to rekindle the gift of God that is in him**, where else can we experience different generations growing together in faith reminding one another and inspiring one another to rekindle the gifts of God that live in each one of us? What other community reminds us that God can do amazing things with our **mustard seed size of faith** [Luke 17:6]?

Our sacred stories shape us; the living stories reflected in one another's flesh and blood lives shape us; the songs we sing, the prayers we pray, the communion we share, the ways we serve, the shared study, the fellowship we enjoy—these all shape us and show us how to live fully and vibrantly in the flow. Tell me, where else do we learn these things, remember these things, speak of these things?

Just like it takes a good bit to maintain our homes well, it takes a good bit to maintain St. Luke's in all its facets. For 2022, about \$411,000 is needed to support our staff, give generously to our community partners and other outreach efforts, maintain our sacred spaces and grounds, and support our various ministries. 90% of these needed funds come from your pledges and your contributions to the plate and Hunger Basket.

We have taken some leaps of faith in recent years to put in place the staff we need to support all that we do, and through your generosity, we have yet to come up short even when we've budgeted a deficit.

The Vestry understands that inflation is having an impact on all of us, so for 2023, the Vestry is focusing much more on holding steady supporting what we have stepped out in faith to do and only increasing where it is essential to do so—remember, inflation makes everything more expensive for the church, too. We do see a need to direct more toward our building maintenance—our building is 30 years old and preventive maintenance is way more cost-effective than deferring these costs.

Holding as steady as we can in our budget doesn't mean our ministries hold steady—we are excited about all that we are doing on so many fronts and especially excited about restarting some of the ministries that had to rest during the pandemic, like restarting Godly Play on Sunday mornings—it's been great to have our kids back doing their jobs in the service! Again, this body of Christ we call St. Luke's is alive and well and eager to participate in the flow of God's love—receiving *and* pouring out that love with one another, receiving *and* pouring out that love in the world.

We know that everyone has their own journey with their practice of giving—some of you give to St. Luke’s because you love this community and believe in our mission and some of you need to see the numbers, while others of you need to hear the story—we’ve tried to do both in the materials we’ve shared; some of you give out of a sense of responsibility and duty; some of you give to keep money from possessing you; some of you give because it is how you express your gratitude and participate in the flow; and for some, their giving practice has a little bit of all of these mixed in. Wherever you are on your journey, even if it is the size of a mustard seed, God can work with it and grow it into something beautiful and lifegiving.

All we ask is that you take this Annual Giving Season as an opportunity to wrestle with the practice of giving. Where are you in flow? Is it blocked, is it wide-open, is it somewhere in-between? How might your discernment about your financial giving and the giving of your time and gifts and passions realign you and get you back in that rhythm of receiving *and* pouring out that taps into the power that really does give life? What might be set free in the process?

This year, let your giving practice be a channel of grace carrying you ever more deeply into the extravagant love of God that only knows how to flow. Amen.

The Rev. Cynthia K. R. Banks
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, Boone, NC
October 2, 2022