

A Costly Path

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All Saints/Stewardship Sunday

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Readings: Matthew 5:1-12
Revelation 7:9-17

I

When your stewardship team met some weeks ago, we decided we need to place our financial giving where it belongs: part and parcel of the overall life of discipleship, giving of time and talents, hospitality and social action.

Giving of ourselves, our all, giving for Love: that is what walking as the companions of Jesus Christ is all about! So All Saints Sunday is a good time to start: we begin our stewardship campaign today with communion and we will bring it all together on the Sunday before thanksgiving with an Agapé meal, a love feast, where we gather in worship once more at tables, and dedicate our intentions for the coming year—including but not limited to our financial intentions—in thanksgiving.

II

A few moments ago we sang a song the Baptist Peace Fellowship asked me to write for the 2003 summer gathering of peacemakers at Keuka College. When they asked, I did not know that in that time my ailing mother would die. And so I found myself faced with but a few weeks to go, and deep in grief for a remarkable woman. I wish you could have known Ineke Carman! I can testify that the weeks following your mom's death are not an easy time to do anything—let alone write a hymn. By grace, I was able to put a few words to an old tune—the words of scripture, set to an old folk song I knew as “The water is wide”.

“With such a cloud of witnesses...” With these words, the writer of Hebrews long ago remembered the faithful witnesses who through the ages had put everything on the line for Love. As I was grieving separation from one amazing woman, I reflected on how the lives of those who have gone before us shape our own life. This is a costly path. And yet it is a joyful path.

We have many saints we have known personally! Our children's story today featured a saint from much further back, one Martin of Tours, drafted at the age of fifteen to serve in the Roman cavalry, at the time a student of Christianity on his way to baptism.

You may have heard the legend of Martin's sharing his soldier's cloak with a beggar. What is forgotten is that Martin when was faced with going into battle for the first time to fight

the Gauls, he realized that his Christian faith would not permit him to take a human life. He reported this to his superiors, saying simply, "I am a soldier of Christ. I cannot fight." and was jailed for cowardice. Offering to go into battle unarmed in front of the other soldiers, Martin got lucky. There was no battle. Martin was discharged. He went on ultimately to become a bishop in what is now France. As a bishop, he was known for his mercy. He pled for the lives of heretics with whom he strongly disagreed, and for pardon for prisoners, jailed as he had been. Princes hid when they heard he was coming. He chose to live very very simply as a monk. He visited his parishes on foot.

Real faith has always been and remains a costly footpath. This is as true for folk today as it was in the 300's when Martin lived. With life in community as Christians today, we often take things for granted. But this is no time to take faith for granted. What this community—Emmanuel Friedens Church—has in common with Martin long ago is our readiness to take a stand of conscience, when and where it is needed. We share a readiness to enter into ministry, and protect human freedom and dignity, in a time and place when churches are often seen as irrelevant or afraid to be controversial. And there is one more thing we share with Martin of Tours—deep concern for those who have no coat, or not enough food, or are left on the outside looking in. Perhaps someday the princes will hide when they hear *we* are coming!

III

For Protestants there is no official list of saints. The Sermon on the Mount describes the blessed, the saints: we are free to draw inspiration from any saint we like. Here at Emmanuel Friedens church, we remember generations of faithful folk who supported two congregations for a century before we finally came together to bring together one new body in Christ out of two old ones.

We follow remarkable people here in this church. It's a challenging legacy to live up to. These who went before us helped start programs for the poor, shelter for women at risk. They opposed war, and insisted on standing together black and white, Jewish and Christian. We follow as part of a remarkable community of dedicated women and men, from generation to generation. Just that history of feisty saints might make us sit up and take notice.

And yet the past is not what we are called to. We are inspired by the people who went before us, but what faces us now is a time with its own unique challenges. You and I have been brought to this place to give witness with our own love and mercy and generosity: to be a liberating presence on the edge of a poor neighborhood and a recovering downtown. It is our calling and no one else's to invite this increasingly diverse city through open doors into a church with a difference—a gathered body made one in Christ. And we follow Jesus here and now: not only with personal piety but by responding to violence, responding to injustice, freeing the captive, offering hospitality to the hungry and thirsty, and including those who have been pushed out or left out of the church whether because of gender identity or orientation, mental health or disability or poverty or race. An old song says it well: *They will know we are Christians by our love.*

This church is not here by accident. God has brought us to Nott Terrace, to Schenectady, for just this day, and just these circumstances. So what is needed in our financial stewardship this year, along with dedication of our time and efforts and gifts, is that we be intentional, joyful and ready to embrace the cost, like the saints before us, but in our own way.

This is a little church with a big vision. And if we are going to live into that vision we are all going to need to support it, with the spirit of our financial support—whatever the dollar amount we can manage—and with our readiness to work together, dream big, listen carefully for our neighbor’s wisdom, seek the mind of Christ together, forgive each other, laugh out loud, love strangers, and by God, even cut our cloaks in half.

IV

There was a time when churches might afford the institutional luxury of maintaining comforting traditions: doing things the way they always have been. But that is no longer the case! For us that has not been the case in a long time! But time clarifies things: with limited numbers and resources, our calling is to go back to the spiritual roots of Christianity as one of many little faithful scattered communities, gathered here and there. That is what you and I are part of—just as much as Martin and his monks—just as much as the exiled Baptists who gathered in Amsterdam in the 1500’s or the exiled Congregationalist pilgrims who gathered down the road in Leiden or the host of other little communities who have stood for conscience and a living faith down through the years.

I want to invite you today to a stewardship campaign that takes heart and soul. For we are stewards not simply of personal giving, nor of the church budget. We are stewards of a radical legacy of welcome and love. And that takes intentional and profound support of this intentional community in Christ. Financially speaking, much how we do ministry is literally funded by the gifts of yesterday, through the generous legacies left to our church’s managed fund. And yet a managed fund does not a congregation make. Even a pledge campaign can’t do that. It isn’t only what we give but how we give it, and the cause we are giving it to! And it is up to each of us to consider prayerfully and joyfully what we can dedicate to this shared adventure. It is up to each of us to consider what the life of a disciple, a fellow traveler with Jesus, looks like in this time and place, right here.

You and I follow in the lineage of Martin of Tours, Patrick of Ireland, Roger Williams and Helen Barrett Montgomery of the Baptists, John Robinson and Anne Hutchinson out of the English reformed heritage, Martin Luther King Jr. and Howard Thurman, Andre and Magda Trocmé of France, and the list goes on. None of these was a hero, but for the call of God and circumstances that plunged them into the light of history. In the moments when it counted, they held back nothing, not their wealth, not their lives. That is the kind of stewardship our times call each of us to, and all of us here, together in community. May God guide us and strengthen us for a costly joyful path. And may we find within ourselves the generosity, the joy and the courage that these times call for.

In the Love of Jesus. Amen.