

***“Leftover Giving. . .Firstfruits Living”***  
***preached by Rev. Elizabeth Macdonald***  
***on Sunday, November 5, 2006***  
***Living Stones Stewardship Campaign II – Fourth Sunday***

***Biblical Texts: Deuteronomy 14:22-26, 2 Corinthians 8:1-7***

Last Sunday we pondered how to share the gift of time with which God has blessed us. This morning we are going to shift our attention to the material resources God has entrusted to us. For many people, this translates into money.

As is the case with time, for most of us, there just never seems to be enough money. A day doesn't go by, an hour doesn't go by without somebody telling us what to do with our money. Most of it is spent before we even receive it. There are grocery bills to pay, and the mortgage, if we are lucky and even if that's paid off, there are always taxes. There's hydro and gas, visa and master card every month. There are new shoes for ourselves and new tires for the car . . . and to cope with the stress of it all, there's Tuesday night at the movies or Friday night at the pub. And we can't just think about today, we have to put away some money for tomorrow.

The list of how we spend our money is long, but if we are good money managers, there will be a line on that list for charitable givings. In most money managing books today, the that line is quite far down the list, so far down, in fact, you could call it “leftover giving” Money that is left over after we pay for everything else is available to give away in support of a worthy cause.

“Leftover Giving” while it seems to make good financial sense in our modern world, it would have made no sense to our Hebrew ancestors. They understood that they were being called into Firstfruits Living. For them, living was precarious even after they were led out of slavery in Egypt into the promised land. It never did flow with milk and honey they way they had dreamed during those 40 years in the wilderness. Theirs was a back-breaking subsistence living subject to harsh geography and unpredictable climate. They couldn't survive on their own human capacity. They looked to the God who have liberated them and saved them from slavery in Egypt to keep on sustaining them, providing for them. And God did!

As the benediction we sing at the end of our worship every Sunday proclaims, God blessed them and kept them. God was kind and gracious to them, God looked upon them with favour and granted them peace. They understood that they were in a covenant relationship based on their loyalty and devotion to God who was loyal and devoted to them. In recognition of their need, their dependence on this constant divine presence in their lives, our Hebrew ancestors gave a portion of the first fruits of their labour back to God in gratitude and thanksgiving and celebration of God's grace and love at work in their lives. For them this meant a tithe or 10% of their first harvest or grain or grapes, as well as the first born in the flocks of sheep or goats, their herd of cows.

Modern sceptics might conclude that this practice of poor people giving back to God off the top was crazy – didn't this leave them even more destitute than they already were? But living faithfully never turns out the way anybody expects!

Our Hebrew ancestors discovered that “first fruits living” enabled them to cope better with crisis and tragedy, to move beyond mere endurance and survival and to actually thrive even in harsh conditions. That's why Jesus encouraged first fruits living – it was the best way he knew through which people could truly experience the healing, forgiveness and a vision of full and abundant life that he offered.

That's why the apostle Paul, in his missionary travels around the Mediterranean kept promoting first fruits living as key to the faithful Christian life.

Firstfruits Living, in which people offer a portion of what God has given them off the top back to God had practical applications, yes. These offerings provided for those in need and supported structure and ongoing life of the faith community as our offerings do today. Firstfruits Living is practical, but at its heart it is a spiritual discipline through which, ancient Hebrews and early Christians discovered, we can and will experience more fully the love of God, the grace and mercy of God, the presence and power of God. With that deeper experience of God we will experience more fully life in all its possibility even in the midst of chaos or in the face of evil. Firstfruits living is a confounding and disarming practice – confounding conventional wisdom and disarming powers and principalities bent on destroying us and all creation.

Left-over giving and Firstfruits living – I see them as ends of a spectrum. When we examine our own giving practices as we are being invited to do during this Living Stones Campaign, we will likely find ourselves somewhere between the two. And we probably move back and forth, depending on whether we're confronted by a sizeable expense we didn't count on or a windfall we didn't expect.

As we consider the gifts of money and time we plan to offer Sydenham Street United Church in 2007, the invitation, the challenge is to move closer toward First fruits living – which asks of us two things. Firstfruits living asks that we give regularly – not just when we feel like it, not just in response to a crisis or appeal, but week in and week out. Firstfruits living asks that we give proportionally. What that proportion will be is for you to discern. It likely won't be the same as the person beside you. There are two questions to consider – two aspects of the same question: What proportion will enable you to declare that all that you have and all that you are comes from God? What proportion will enable you to participate in doing God's will in this world by support ministry and mission of Christ's church?

Is First Fruits Giving riskier than Leftover giving? Yes, it is – but it's worth it.

Albert Winn, an American Presbyterian pastor known for his passion for stewardship sees it this way.

*Did you ever see a ship launched? There it sits on the dry land, shored up on beams, perfectly safe, looking altogether out of place and utterly useless. Then the beams are removed and champagne is broken across the bow. Very slowly at first, but then gathering up speed and momentum, the ship slides down the beams until it splashes into the water. There is sort of a shudder and its rights itself. Then the ship is afloat! Where it belongs! Beautiful and useful and terribly exciting!*

*That's what happens when a Christian decides to launch out into first fruits living. Of course we hope to raise the budget next year. But that is not a matter of eternal importance. What is eternally important is how many of us take the risk and move down the ways of our lives until – splash – we are afloat where we belong, on the broad adventurous ocean of the love and mercy of God.*

(p.86 **Teaching and Preaching Stewardship**)

Come . . . let's move beyond Leftover giving. We can do it. Together. Let's take the risk, let's embrace the hope, let's claim the promise of Firstfruit living!