

Silver and Gold have I none.

"Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." (Acts 3:6 NIV)

In this fall season many of our churches are pressing for a commitment from their members and friends, a pledge of money. As I was visiting as a retired Episcopal Priest, this Scripture from Acts came to my mind. In the light of this fall of 2010 and of the economic conditions of America and most of the nations of the world, I could hear many in the congregation repeating, at least under their breath, silver and gold I do not have. This asking of a commitment of money is not new and probably has been requested every year no matter what the financial circumstance might be for the average person. It seems to be the religious thing to do, so that reminded me of a joke: [There were two nuns as passengers on an airplane and they were dressed in full habit. While flying, the plane began to have problems and many of the passengers were becoming disturbed. The Flight Attendants were also concerned, and seeing the two sisters, they went to them and asked them if they would be kind enough to do something religious. After the nuns gave it some thought, they rose from their seats and began taking an offering.] Indeed, an offering is the one thing you can be sure of when you attend church.

It is interesting to me that much of the material about pledging does contains some thought about Time, Talent, and Treasure. There is an acknowledgment that there is more to one's pledge than one's money (treasure), but the information about time and talent is often not emphasized as much as the treasure of one's pledge. While some churches have requested a consideration of sharing one's time and talent by including some lists of what one might do for their church in time and talent, the primary and more complete appeal is to their treasure. Many suggest that a Tithe is a spiritual goal or that one should at least offer a significant Proportion or Percentage of their annual salary for their pledge. Many go further in providing charts of levels of income with percentages of one to ten percent might actually be. Then, usually, a special Sunday is chosen when everyone is expected to attend and place their pledges in the offering or perhaps carry them personally to the front in an appropriate procession with their offering for that Sunday.

In the Acts of the Apostles, in this and other verses, the collection was often quite different. In Acts chapter 3 there was a beggar, *"One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer--at three in the afternoon. Now a man crippled from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said,*" It wasn't the church but a needy person who was asking for their treasure. Since Peter and John had no money either, they gave him what they had - an opportunity for a new life saying, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk!"

This speaks volumes to me about our churches today. When people come into our doors or, more than likely, we see people with need all around us we appear to be asking all inclusively for support of the church. In Acts the early church met in homes and had no paid staff as best we can tell. Most of their difficulties seemed to be with public opinion, the leaders in Jerusalem, and their own wonder as to what was happening among them in ways that seem so miraculous. When Peter and John returned from the leaders of the people and elders in Jerusalem they had discussion among themselves with meditation and prayer. *"After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly."* (Acts 4:31 NIV) They were of one mind and heart in the understanding that none of their belongings were truly theirs but were gifts to be shared with one another. They were also inspired to share their goods and the life giving Spirit of God with others, especially with those in need. Their surrounding circumstances made it difficult; religious quarrels, political distrust, the arrest and stoning of Stephen, the persecutions of Saul, but in spite of all of this the church has survived to this day.

I am aware that this is not history, as we presently understand history, especially since the same author of the Gospel of Luke probably wrote it several decades after the time of these happenings. The accuracy of the details of scripture is not as important as their spirit of faith, perseverance and the lessons we can learn from their witness. The Acts of the Apostles share the story of the Christian movement as it began among Jewish followers of Jesus and how it went on to become a faith for the whole world. I am aware of their personal experiences with the power and presence of God having personally heard and seen it in the life of Jesus and his Apostles. Because of their personal faith they were actively involved with the whole of their beings; body, mind, and spirit. This total commitment and enthusiasm was the key to their success and the continuance of their community of faith.

So what about our churches today? Before I share some of my personal witness about the 21st century church, let me share some current books from **Seabury Books** that may give you a clue and demonstrate how we may continue today just as these earlier people of God did in the 1st century. There are five small paperback volumes that speak volumes to encourage us in our ACTS today:

- *"Starting From Zero With \$0 - building mission-shaped ministries on a shoestring"* by Becky Garrison
- *"Mission-shaped questions - defining issues for today's church"* - Steven Croft, editor
- *"Mission-shaped Spirituality - the transforming power of mission"* - by Susan Hope
- *"Mission-shaped Church - church planting and fresh expressions of church in a changing context"* - forward by Dr. Rowan Williams and preface by Bishop Graham Cray
- *"Mission-shaped Parish - traditional church in a changing world"* by Paul Bayes, Tim Sledge, John Holbrook, Mark Rylands & Martin Seeley

We all know that change is inevitable and often painful but change is the only way we grow and succeed. These books may help you see how change is good and encourage you to rethink church today. The people of God must be involved together with commitment and enthusiasm because that is still the key to creative witness and service in our world.

Now, please allow me to add my "two cents" for what it may be worth. Most churches never have enough money to do what they may choose or desire! I have come to realize that money is not really the problem but people are usually the problem. Peter and John declared that they did not have money, but look what they did have! Look what did happen in the 1st century of our church history - believe it or not. What may be lacking in our lives, individually and together, that may prevent us from being the people and the church to which we might aspire?

Experiencing the love and presence of God activating our lives:

Love is essential for every living creature, especially human beings. We cannot love ourselves until we know we are loved and love is a gift. Until we experience this gift of love personally we cannot share love because we cannot give to others what we do not possess. There are many passages in scripture that tell us about God's love for everyone and for all that was made and one verse that summarizes it; *"Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love."* (1 John 4:8 NIV) Continuing to learn more about life and the marvels of the universe, we come to appreciate these phenomenal gifts of which we are a part. Achieving confidence in the probabilities, possibilities, and productivity inherent in these marvels of creation we become more fully alive. I have spoken about this at length in my series about *"Learning to Live Well"* and I invite you to read it by going here: http://janddhealth.intuitwebsites.com/Live_Well_I.pdf

Character - *"the inherent complex of attributes that determines a persons moral and ethical actions and reactions"*

Good character is a great asset for success because it comes from a life of righteousness, that is, "*adhering to moral principles*". Our personal worth or value is primary to giving us full advantage in life. We are told in the Gospel of Matthew that Jesus made this point, "*By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.*" (7:16,20 NIV) I refer you to another article in "*Learning to Live Well,*" for a more complete consideration of these characteristics; personal, persistence, and perseverance. http://janddhealth.intuitwebsites.com/Live_Well_II.pdf

Productive - "*having the ability to produce or originate*"

There are some important stages of productivity that are essential if one is to remain productive throughout their lives - survival, security, and significance. Personal growth and well being is very important if we are to become and remain fruitful during our lifetime. Again, I would like to encourage you to read another article in my series on "*Learning to Live Well*", by going here: http://janddhealth.intuitwebsites.com/Live_Well_III.pdf

The Power of Two or Three:

Recalling the experience of the early Christians - having the love and presence of God activating our lives - we learn how the Realm of God may enter our lives as well. When Jesus began his ministry as an itinerant Rabbi he gathered his disciples to serve with him rather than go it alone. The model of two or three developed early when Jesus sent out the additional seventy, two by two. We also learn that it was not unusual for the Apostles to work together by twos or threes as well. In the book of Acts the early church gathered together as a community for worship on the first day of the week, but they accomplished their work during the week by working together in twos or threes. The scriptures tell us that Peter and John, or Peter, James, and John and others worked together in presenting the Gospel as a team. They appointed Deacons to facilitate the organization of the congregation for paying special attention to all who were in need. As the church developed outside of Jerusalem we would hear about Paul and Barnabus working together with others to extend the witness and work of the early church. In time they selected qualified people to leadership as Bishops, Presbyters, and Deacons for the work of ministry in newly established congregations.

Even the wisdom of the world declares, "Two heads are better than one". Recognizing that "no man is an Island" our need for almost everything in life is most excellent in company with others. While some ideas and visions might be initiated by one person, the development and expansion is accomplished by the involvement of others that sometimes becomes a large corporation. Good judgment recognizes that the talents and abilities of many people are usually necessary to bring even the simplest ideas to their productive completion.

As a retired Episcopal priest in North Carolina I have noted the efficient and well organized function of our churches here. Since North Carolina is a rather large and expansive State, we have three separate Dioceses. The most central one, the Diocese of North Carolina, has the Bishop of the Diocese, along with two assisting bishops to serve this breadth of territory. Under their leadership are hundreds of priests and deacons who are assigned to serve over more than 100 parishes and other creative ministries. In the larger congregations there is usually more than one priest to provide leadership for members and friends that comprise the local community of faith. These parishes usually have many smaller groups who serve within the parish as members and friends identify their talents and interests to become actively involved in the plethora of needs around them in their towns and cities. They often thrive well in their work together because of several advantages; eclectic points of view from multiple resources of leadership and congregants, financial assets from previous generations along with the generosity of those contributing today, organized programs that coordinate and maintain the character and productivity of their church's mission, bringing the style of the earlier church into a modern pattern for the 21st century.

Many of the smaller parishes in the diocese, without many of these assets, find it more difficult to maintain their aspiration for ministry in their church and neighborhoods. Some may even lack the ability to afford a priest, maintain their physical structures, have enough people to serve the duties and needs of the parish community and also be able to fulfill their desire to serve the needs of others around them. Their solution may be obtained from ECUSA (The Episcopal Church in the United States of America) to rethink and vision newer models of church for today. The five small books listed above cost very little from our Seabury Press Publishers and introduce new ways of revisioning that role for the people of God today. It will take people who know and have experienced God's love, have the character for righteousness, and who desire to be productive in propagating the Realm of God in order to find the way for serving their local areas. The first book in the series may give you an important clue, *"Starting From Zero With \$0 - building mission-shaped ministries on a shoestring"*.

For a number of years now I have developed a favorite saying, *"money is seldom the problem - people are usually the problem"*. To say the least, I was very pleased to see this small book, mentioned in the previous paragraph, which shows that money should not be a primary concern for mission and ministry today. Like the early church, I believe that the people of God need to share their time, talent, and treasure as part of their support to their communities. At the beginning of this paper I shared only one joke about the church and money, but there are many hundreds that make it clear our reputation in "the collection". With the fact that most families today have the parent(s) working hard with more than one job, money is tight. When adding the responsibilities of working to keep the home stable and clean, time and talent are pretty much out the window when it comes to being part of their "collection". In this economy we should understand that the treasure part has clearly diminished. So what is a congregation to do? **Try reading the books and be prepared to rethink Church!**

The church today, more than ever, needs to be about the Realm or Kingdom of God. Jesus came to tell us about that in his message and demonstrate it in his manner of life. *"Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven"*, is an all too familiar theme we often repeat but seldom live. The Realm of God is brought by people who daily receive God's love for themselves and actively look for ways of sharing that love with others. The Realm of God is present in people of good character whose life is determined by moral and ethical actions and reactions by adhering to moral principles. People who are continually open to God's Life-giving Spirit, giving them the ability to produce and originate new and abundant life of caring and sharing, maintain the Realm of God.

In closing, for those who may be interested, there are more articles on our website that speak further to this topic, you may also visit the entire website at: <http://janddhealth.com/>