

## **“Faithful Together”**

Mark 12:28-34; I Corinthians 12:4-14 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – April 21, 2024  
Stewardship Campaign Kick-Off

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might offer our whole selves in love to you and serve our neighbors in Christ’s name. Amen.*

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Maybe you’ve noticed this already – “faithfulness” seems to be our watchword for the year so far. We spent the season of Lent focused on how to be faithful in the fragile times we are living through. And here we are, at the official kick-off of our planning season for future ministry, exploring how to be “Faithful Together.” This is not a coincidence. We are in a moment, my beloved VLMers. We are at a moment when we need to dig deep and discern what it truly means for us to be church and how to do that as best we are able. And faithfulness is the best word for what it is God is calling forth from us.

The thing about faithfulness is that it isn’t just one thing; it’s more the way we do all the things. And that’s why I wanted to pull together these two scripture passages for our stewardship campaign this year. Because being church faithfully requires that each of us brings our whole self into the process. But it also requires that we then combine our selves together as a community. Y’all have been telling me for years that stewardship is about more than our money. And I have harped on money for years because that often felt like an excuse to avoid talking about money.

It turns out, we're both right. We have talked about money more openly than many of us were comfortable with for some years now, and the result is that we're more financially stable than makes any sense. I'm not saying we've achieved the level of sustainability we would prefer. But you are a congregation of generous and faithful donors, undergirded by investments from VLMers of days gone by that provide our "don't panic" fund. That combination is something many congregations our size could only dream of. That is why the conversation we are beginning today is different than it might be.

Because you're right, there are so many other aspects of stewardship that we need to address. Heart, soul, mind, and strength. That is why, this year, you have an "Intentions Offering" slip instead of an Estimate of Giving card. Because it's time to be as serious about the rest of our contributions as we are about our money. Serious not only about carefully considering how we can pitch in, but also about asking for God's blessing in carrying out those commitments, as we do each year on Consecration Sunday.

It is my expectation that when many of you work your way through that Intentions Offering, thinking about the things you do that fit into each category, you will be impressed by how much of a contribution you are already making. I certainly am. Some of you may find that there are aspects here that you have neglected, and I pray that you will find a way to plug in that will match up with your gifts and passions. But if you discover you've got a completed dance card in every category, then let me

challenge you to truly embrace the teaching that stewardship is also about time and talents and not just money.

When I was a child, my parents were super involved lay leaders. And that meant that when the “Pony Express” stewardship model came along, they became circuit riders. By the time I arrived here at Vista La Mesa, it was very clear that nobody was going to sign up to go over to someone else’s house and talk to them about how much they could increase their pledge this year. I’m guessing some of you are shuddering at the very thought. But don’t worry – I’m not asking you to do that. All I’m asking is for you to consider how you can ask for help. We say that time and talents are a vital aspect of stewardship, and yet, far too often, we just go ahead and do the thing ourselves. It seems easier. It gets things done faster. It gets things done “right.”\* (Giant asterisk by that word “right” but that’s a sermon for another day!).

But the truth is, if we are volunteering diligently at something at church and never inviting anyone new into the work, we are nurturing our own spiritual needs at the expense of the church’s.

A colleague of mine offered an amazing reflection about this question this past week. I asked special permission to share it with you. Andy Mangum is the Regional Minister in the Southwest Region, which is Texas and most of New Mexico. He was contemplating the lessons about service that Paul offers here in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of First Corinthians, based on both the content of this chapter and its placement in the

wider letter. He wrote: “I believe Paul envisioned service to the church as a way to experience the blessings of the Christian faith. There's a principle at play in service that mirrors Communion. Both service and Communion connect individual believers to Christ and to fellow believers. Communion also serves to unite believers with Christ and with each other. In the preceding chapters, Paul provides instructions about Communion. In chapter 10, he writes, ‘Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.’ Service with our spiritual gift unites us to Christ, and despite the diversity of gifts, they actually unite us with each other, as we work together as a body.”

Andy then brought up a concept you may have heard of, the 80/20 principle of leadership. It’s based on a concept from time management, but in this context, the idea is that generally in churches (and other organizations), 20% of the people are doing 80% of the work. But in acknowledging that is often the case in congregations, Andy refuses to let go of the similarity he sees Paul drawing between communion and service.

He continues: “Imagine if we viewed service in the church—the use of our spiritual gifts for the church's mission—in the same light as Communion. We wouldn't be satisfied if Communion operated on the 80/20 rule that we often accept in service. We're content to say, ‘80% of the service is done by 20% of the people,’ but we wouldn't accept it if we said, ‘80% of Communion is consumed by 20% of the people.’”

Andy concludes: “For Paul, there are three places where the ache of loneliness is eased and the need to connect with the divine is met: in the waters of initiation, in the meal of remembrance, and in the service rendered through the gifts of the Spirit. These are also the places where we participate in the life of Christ and unite with sisters and brothers in the church: in the faith surrounding baptism, the hope embodied in Communion, and the love extended by God-empowered ministry.”

There is a reason we have these conversations about our commitments to service and stewardship in the context of worship. Just like worship, our service, our contributions are about our individual spiritual growth and our shared life as a community. Worship helps us re-focus on bringing our whole selves into communion with God. And it also, hopefully, re-connects us with one another, as the Body of Christ.

We are in a moment, VLM, and this moment is going to require new things of us. So we’ve launched this conversation a little differently this year than we have in years past. We will need new ways of seeing, new ways of hearing, and new ways of thinking. So let’s engage in an exercise right now, that might help us wake up the creative portions of our minds. I want you to take a moment and consider the letters here that make up the word “TOGETHER,” and then I want you to turn to a neighbor and tell them which letter might represent you, and listen to them share which one might be them. Maybe you like that G because dark green is your favorite color. Maybe you’re that second T because you have broad shoulders. Or the first E

because you feel like your participation here is a little blurry around the edges. Maybe you like that H because it could represent a level of participation that is strengthened by a healthy prayer life. Or the first T just because it seems solid, like you aspire to be. You could even pick one of the letters in the word “FAITHFUL” if you prefer! Any reason you connect with one of these letters is fine; this is just a warm-up. Take a moment to consider, and then share with your neighbor. Zoomers, I would love to have you share your thoughts in the chat box. [time to reflect]

Which letter you are is clearly not the most important question of this Stewardship Campaign. But a creative exercise like this can help us into new and different ways of thinking about our involvement in Vista La Mesa. I hope you will carry that with you into this week, as you pray over this Intentions Offering and consider all you are doing and if there is something else you would like to try. I hope that you will know how deeply your contributions – financial and otherwise – are appreciated and needed, and that you will experience the blessing of communion with a loving God that such generosity brings. I hope you will join us next Sunday, when we gather again and ask God to bless our commitments, that we indeed might be church, faithful together. Hallelujah and Amen.