

3/22/2020 - Matthew 6:1-4, 16-34

I am delivering this message a week earlier than originally anticipated, because “Do Not Worry About Tomorrow” is an apt word for what is going on in the world today.

There’s the outbreak of the coronavirus virus that began in China, spread thru Asia and Europe, and now in the US. As a result, I’ve cancelled May study leave in Italy, not willing to risk additional time away from the church in quarantine. Love for this congregation is more important than unrecoverable expense. This decision is also one of wisdom rather than worry, prayerfully discerned thru weighing benefits to the church against risks. Shortly after my decision, the US imposed a ban on flights to Europe. The Arnold Sports Festival last weekend was the 1st large event affected in Ohio. This weekend the St Patrick’s day parade was next cancelled in Dublin. Only online classes will be offered for a time in a number of Ohio universities. This Wednesday, I met with local area pastors to pray and discuss matters together. Shortly following, other stipulations came forth. Medical only visits are permitted in senior residences. Gatherings of over 100 people are cancelled. As of tomorrow Monday, Ohio schools are closed for 3 weeks, expanding spring break. There are people now in self-imposed quarantines. These developments were discussed at session on Thursday to discern plans for FPC. Our church calendar in the bulletin is amended with numerous cancellations. The manner in which we will be conducting elements of worship will exercise prudence. We are in continuous contact to update safety plans as needed. Since Saturday morning, 26 cases of the coronavirus have been confirmed in Ohio with 7 hospitalizations and 264 are under investigation. (*After the Sunday service, Ohio closed all bars and restaurants to in house customers.*)

The virus has also affected the market. In addition, contrary to the words of today’s passage from the sermon on the mount, our natural human response to current news is to store up. Around the world, including Ohio, are runs on disinfectants, hand sanitizer, toilet paper, canned goods, and other products needed in the outbreak or in potential quarantine. Elevated prices are also noted.

So, what do we do? Although we do not want to participate in worry, we do want to practice wisdom. We will not submit to fear. We continue to carry on our faith in Jesus Christ, Our Lord. We keep our eyes on him. We carry on. We continue to worship. We continue to pray. The president has called for today to be a national day of prayer.

Even before recent events, I’ve encouraged people not to be worriers, but to instead be prayer warriors, lifting concerns to God, just as we lift the joys and concerns of the congregation during worship every week. In the same manner, those who have been discerned by the congregation to be spiritual leaders have promised to pray for the church. At installation officers are asked, “*Will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?*” Then, the office of deacon came about in Acts 6:4, so that the presbyters or elders “*will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.*” In the Reformed tradition, ascribing to the priesthood of all believers, all members of the church also promise to pray, being asked, “*Will you be a faithful member of this congregation, share regularly in its worship and ministry through your prayers and gifts, your study and service, and so fulfill your calling to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?*” So, dear congregation, please pray that we might discern and carry out God’s will here at FPCP for the kingdom.

With our promise to pray, every meeting of session opens & closes with prayer. We also stop to pray as we carefully discern items of business on the agenda. At our last meeting on 3/12, the session prayed over New Beginnings, a 5-year-old report about potential church renewal for us. We prayed to discern what God may be calling us to do now, as circumstances have delayed action in these last several years. Session is praying over some potential steps to take action for our future & contribute to God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven, but had to once again delay any specific plans due to discussions around the coronavirus. So, please pray for our leaders and our church, while we seek God's 2020 vision for us! No virus stops the will of God. We should not cooperate with such a plan. We need to stand firm to continue God's work.

At the February meeting, the session set the budget, which was reported to you at the 3/1 congregational meeting. Then, Mat gave joyful thanks for our means to faithfully carry out our ministry! Also, at the February session meeting, we acknowledged that, just as we have not acted toward renewal as ascribed in the New Beginnings report, neither have we encouraged stewardship. No pledges for giving have been asked for a number of years. At the February meeting, I presented to session a stewardship plan that was developed in the first church that I served, which was inspired by a 13-year-old youth in the confirmation class. You may recall the spiritual gift inventory from Romans 12 in the 2/16 bulletin that you had the opportunity to complete. Some of you completed it. For those who haven't there are copies in the narthex. This youth, according to his spiritual gifts inventory, was exceedingly strong in the gift of generosity. In speaking to the young man about his gift of giving, a simple but fun stewardship program was developed. Since he enjoyed it, he even developed and starred in a number of stewardship skits presented to the congregation. When I told the session in February that I would be preaching on today's passage, they asked me to encourage a pledge on stewardship as part of the sermon.

I must admit that with the recent market declines, I prayed about whether we should postpone talking about stewardship right now. But when I visited homebound members a couple of weeks ago, one couple asked why we haven't asked for pledges for a number of years. I divulged the current plan for stewardship, mentioned the market decline, & admitted my hesitancy. But they encouraged for us to proceed. This Thursday, session agreed.

Scripture is direct. "Do not worry about tomorrow." We are, however, to be responsible stewards. Stewardship is a spiritual discipline. Stewardship of our resources is a visible outcome of the spiritual fruit of joy. This we have learned in our Bible study on Fruit of the Spirit. This is because stewardship is act of faith. Stewardship also requires prayers of discernment, and probably some education.

So, we learn first that although we may be uncomfortable in talking about money, Jesus was not. Money was one of Jesus' biggest topics, along with belief, that is trusting in God. Stewardship of resources and belief or trust are topics that directly correspond with each other. So, please don't be anxious as we move into this favorite topic of Jesus.

Next, know that giving is to be done freely, cheerfully, and with an attitude of gratitude and out of love. There is no force. No pressure. In fact, you may recall how I preached from the book of Ruth during Advent. At the church where I served for 12 years, the test sermon that I preached to decide whether I would receive a call there was from Ruth. Then I preached a sermon entitled, "A Pledge of Love," about tithing.

Giving is also private, as Jesus promotes at the start of Matthew 6. Besides tithing or what we refer to as our plate offering, there is also giving to the needy. Giving to the needy includes designated giving to benefit causes outside the local congregation, such as for missions or outreach. But whether tithing or designated giving to those who are needy, giving is private. This is why we use sealed envelopes, numbered for privacy, in which we can deposit our giving. Even when we are not able to be present to give, giving can also be made online thru the church website or by mail.

In order to maintain privacy, when ready, a completed pledge form from our bulletin can be inserted into a church envelope or any envelope labelled as giving and mailed or deposited in the offering plate.

Let's look at a pledge form now. After filling in name, envelope#, and phone number, please pledge time for prayer and other ways to support the church with time. Then note that the pledge form has four choices for giving tithes.

First Presbyterian Church
2020 Fasting Stewardship Pledge

Please privately insert into your giving envelope.

Name _____ Envelope # _____

Phone Number _____

Pledge of Time: *Everyone has a gift to contribute.*

_____ I will spend time praying for the church.

_____ I would enjoy pledging time for the following church work:

(Choices below may come from your spiritual gifts inventory. Contact office if needed.)

Pledge of Tithes: *(Know that you are loved, no matter what.)*

_____ I regret that I am unable to give financial support in 2020.

_____ I regret that I must reduce financial support in 2020 to:

\$ _____ *(circle one)* weekly/monthly/yearly.

_____ I pledge, God willing, to give as in 2019:

\$ _____ *(circle one)* weekly/monthly/yearly.

_____ I pledge, God willing, to increase 2020 giving to:

\$ _____ *(circle one)* weekly/monthly/yearly

First, we recognize that, due to financial circumstances, some may not be able to give at all this year or may have to reduce giving from last year. Look at the back of the form to see examples of income that may change from year to year.

BACK OF THE PLEDGE FORM

**One may adjust giving as needed with changes in income like wages, tips, bonuses, prizes, gifts, winnings, inheritances, insurance, pension, social security, retirement withdrawals, investments, etc. Please contact the pastor should a spiritual or other need arise. We care and practice benevolence.*

If giving needs to be reduced, please do not feel bad if you need to make one of the first two choices: not giving or needing to reduce giving. Just note the choice, but I also invite you to please meet with me as your pastor for prayer. Also know that if needed a benevolence fund is available, which to protect the dignity of recipients is overseen by myself and elders on the mission committee.

This being said, we do hope that most of us will at least be able to maintain or to increase giving in 2020. But one may question how much to give? That is between you and God.

But here are some Scriptural guidelines that may help. The New Testament gives a number of examples of specific giving of 100% of assets, such as the widow's last mite and those giving all their possessions. Yet, most of us are not inclined to take a vow of poverty nor are all of us expected to do so. So, in looking at the Old Testament, we see that a minimum tithe is set at 10%, which is 10% of income. In the OT, tithes support the work of the temple or in our case the operation of the church. Now some may want to give a tithe at some point, but need time to build there. The good news is that everyone increasing just a little can make a substantial difference. For example, if everyone would increase their tithe by a mere \$3 per week, the annual increase to giving would amount to over \$12k. In other words, as Lent has a focus on prayer and fasting, if every person would fast for example, one fast food breakfast sandwich or soft drink each week of the year, we could increase total income by over \$12k. And if some would be willing to fast a full meal from a fast food, family, or fine dining restaurant, the annual increase could be more. See examples of fasting to increase giving on the bottom of the pledge form to help decide an increase.

BOTTOM OF THE BACK OF THE PLEDGE FORM

Perhaps consider increasing pledge by fasting as follows:

Amount of "fast" Increase = annually for 52 weeks or 12 months

\$3 fast food breakfast sandwich	\$156	\$36
\$5 fast food box	\$260	\$60
\$7 sandwich or sub	\$364	\$84
\$10 family restaurant lunch	\$520	\$120
\$15 family restaurant dinner	\$780	\$180
\$20 moderate dinner w/ dessert	\$1040	\$240
\$30 fine dining dinner	\$1560	\$360

Now, some may be wondering, if we are meeting budget and have money in the bank, why increase giving? First of all, thank you congregation for what you give to meet operating expenses and to funding giving to "the needy" in mission and outreach. Still, realize that giving is more about spiritual growth than finances. In order to grow spiritually God may be calling us not to worry and not to hoard. God may be calling us to invest in the future of his kingdom, through commitment and resources.

Can each afford to give at least \$3 more a week? Or maybe the question is, for the sake of our future as a church, can we afford not to grow in giving and in the Spirit? In times such as this, can we afford not to put our trust in Jesus? Let us pray to hear and heed God's word to not to worry about tomorrow, but to instead store up everlasting treasures in heaven. Let's us continue to be a giving congregation, fulfilling the will and word of God. "Do Not Worry about tomorrow," but invest in tomorrow. Trust in Jesus.