

“Not Just Passing the Plate, Building a Longer Table”

2 Corinthians 4:5–1 - Rev. Adam Hange

Opening Prayer

Holy One, ground and source of being, meet us in this moment. Help us hear your still-speaking voice. Help us see the connections between us, and our neighbors. Most of all, help us find *our place* in the story you are writing. Amen.

I. What a Week!

It's week two in our annual Stewardship series. Over the last week, I got to do three things, which I want to share with you, because every single one was made possible by you and through your support...

At the invitation of one of the members, I sat in on one of our weekly Alcoholic's Anonymous meetings. (*Did you know there will be 11 different recovery meetings in our buildings between this Sunday and next?*) Well, I watched what happened in that circle — the honesty, the accountability, the solidarity. Transformative is not too strong a word. I didn't say a word, but I didn't have to. Just being there was powerful in itself. I was reminded how important it is for us to make room for meetings like these.

On Thursday night, our Confirmation Class, along with other youth from our Westside Youth Collective, volunteered to serve up a taco dinner for HomePlate Youth Services — a ministry that supports youth experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity. Every week, youth find a meal, a welcoming and supportive community, and access to vital resources. It happens right downstairs, every Thursday, rain or shine. Some of the leaders were once youth who attended, and are now they are leading it.

And then on Friday, I was invited to serve the role of community-chaplain, and share a reflection at the Pacific University alumni remembrance service, in Founder's Hall. After I shared my meditation, each name was read, and a bell was rung. Tears were shed. Hugs shared. Connections made or strengthened.

Three completely different gatherings. None of them happened on a Sunday. None of them took place in this sanctuary.

The one thing in common: your generosity made the room, and your vision of church, and our shared ministry and mission, made all of this possible.

Now, here is where I want to get a little ...well... subversive...

I don't share this to pat myself, or ourselves, on the back, and say look how much good we are doing.

I share these stories, because none of those gatherings ... looks like "God's blessing." Prosperity. Or "Living Your Best Life."

In each case, the people who gathered were there because of ... a challenge, a need, or an ache.

And because, that is where I believe the Gospel calls me, calls us, to be.

II. The Water We Swim In

As a pastor, it's not always easy talking about money in church. You mention "stewardship season" and people look for the exits.

A recent Pew Research study found that 59% of Americans think churches are too concerned with money and power.

That number should give us pause. Not defensiveness — pause. *Because we know the critique has sometimes been earned.*

We live inside a culture absolutely saturated with messages about wealth and prosperity.

Messages like: "The universe provides. Prosperity is a blessing for the faithful. Pull yourself up by your bootstraps. Manifest what you need. Get rich quick. And "There is no such thing as a free lunch."

And faith communities — honestly — have often struggled to make sense of why our economic systems work so differently for different people.

We carry the questions quietly, because we're not sure we're supposed to ask them out loud:

Why are some people wealthy but don't seem to deserve wealth?

Why are some people so good, and yet so poor - barely scraping by?

Aren't church people supposed to be somehow above the question of income and spending?

These are honest questions. They deserve an honest answer. Which is why we need to read Paul carefully — and, importantly, read him “from below.”

III. Reading Paul From Below

One of the things we sometimes miss, is who the intended audience is for a scripture.

In this second letter to the church in Corinth, Paul describes himself as a servant — a slave, even. I don't believe that word-choice was accidental.

Many of the people receiving this letter were themselves enslaved, or poor, or being persecuted. Paul is not writing from a place of comfort. He is not writing from the winner's circle.

He is, himself, afflicted. Perplexed. Struck down. By every measure the world uses to calculate a “blessed” life, Paul is losing. And this is the man who writes: we have this ***treasure***.

Paul's life and ministry are the antithesis of the prosperity gospel — the promise that more faith brings more riches, that wealth is a sign of God's favor.

Paul is broke and being persecuted, and he is writing some of the most significant theology in all of Christian scripture. *His very life is the refutation.*

My friend and colleague, the Reverend Doctor Elena Larssen, puts the contrast plainly:

“Human-designed economic systems are designed to create affluence for some; God’s economy of salvation is designed to create abundance for all.”

God’s economy doesn’t wait for better conditions. It runs through these ones — above and beyond, behind and within all earthly struggle — not to rescue us from difficulty, but to give us hope inside it.

Which brings us to Paul’s image of a clay jar.

IV. The Clay Jar

Clay jars in the ancient world were ordinary. Cheap. Breakable. They weren’t decorative. They held oil, grain, water — the stuff of daily survival. Nobody admired the jar. The point was always what was in it.

Paul says: that’s us. We are the clay jars. Humble. Ordinary. Fragile — and yet somehow resilient. The treasure we carry is not ours. We didn’t manufacture it. We can’t entirely explain it. But it’s here, and it moves through us.

I want to be honest with you: we don’t always get this right. The Church has gotten it wrong — sometimes badly, sometimes publicly. We will get it wrong again. We are genuinely fragile.

There is a great deal written about the demise of organized religion. And yet — here we are. Still passing bread and cup to one another. Still trying to make the life of Jesus visible through these ordinary hands, in this ordinary place.

Our buildings are clay jars. Our congregation is a clay jar. The AA meeting downstairs is a clay jar. The HomePlate dinner table is a clay jar. None of it is precious in the way the world prizes precious things. Yet, all of it is carrying something.

We don’t want our buildings to become too precious to host AA, or HomePlate, or a kids’ camp. The beauty in this place is real — and it is something we tend, and share, and pour out. The moment we start protecting the jar more than what’s in it, something has gone wrong.

The treasure is not the building. The treasure is what moves through it.

V. Subversive Stewardship

When I was in Boise, at our sibling church, last week, I saw something that inspired me. It was outside their sanctuary - something they called the “Sharing Shelf” (describe)

What I like about it is the way it shifts the typical order of things — the usual script we run around charity, where someone with resources gives down to someone without.

The shelf is lateral. It was neighbors. It was what Kimmerer would call a gift economy made visible on a metal shelf in a church hallway.

My friend Elena has a name for this way of operating. She calls it subversive stewardship, and here is her definition:

“Subversive stewardship means using your gifts to create the world that God calls us to build and experiencing transformation in the process.”

— Rev. Dr. Elena Larssen, Subversive Stewardship

She goes on to ask a question I want to sit with for a moment — and I want you to sit with it too:

“What if we saw our pledges as gifts that connect us to one another?”

That is a powerful shift in perspective from our regular spending, where spending dollars means receiving goods and services.

Subversive stewardship is a way to see our giving as building God’s world, and playing by the rules of the Gospel to build a better world.”

— Rev. Dr. Elena Larssen, Subversive Stewardship

That is the shift. Not a transaction — the fostering of a relationship. Not payment for services rendered — a gift that binds us to one another and to the work of the Gospel.

Everyday, each of us makes choices. We make choices about how to spend our time, our energy, our attention. We choose what kind of economy we participate in. That AA meeting is a choice. That HomePlate dinner is a choice. That sharing shelf is a choice. This table we are about to gather around is a choice.

Paul says: death is at work in us, but life in you. Our vulnerability — our clay-jar fragility — is not a problem to be solved. It is the very thing that makes us permeable to one another.

We hold the treasure not because we are strong enough to hold it, but because we keep showing up, breaking, broken, and resilient together, so that the Life of Christ may be made visible through us.

Closing Invitation

Every system is a choice.

This congregation has made one. We are not imitating the prosperity gospel. We are not passing the plate and calling it done. We are working to build a longer table — in this room, downstairs on Thursday nights, in AA circles, in other places out in our community, in every act of solidarity that says your life and my life are already bound together.

So today, as we move toward this table — which belongs to none of us and all of us — I invite you into generosity as an act of subversion. Not charity. Not obligation. *Solidarity.*

Give as someone who knows their life is already tangled up with the lives of their neighbors.

Give as someone who has received what they did not earn and cannot fully explain.

Give as a clay jar — ordinary, breakable, and carrying something extraordinary.

We are still here. And as long as we are here, we are in this together.