

## To Be of Use

Sermon by [Cynthia A. Jarvis](#)

November 14, 2010, Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

### II Chronicles 20:3-12

### Titus 3:1-15

*“And let people learn to devote themselves to good works in order to meet urgent needs, so that they may not be unproductive.”*

A case could be made that the apostle Paul was, at most, a visiting fireman on the island of Crete. We have no record of his ever having been there. All that is known of his interaction with the Cretans is what can be deduced from a letter addressed to Titus, the fellow mentioned in the passage from II Corinthians *your* visiting fireman quoted last Sunday. There Paul urged Titus to complete this generous undertaking--a collection for the poverty-stricken saints at Jerusalem--among the Corinthians. So Titus was the fellow left in Corinth and now is the fellow sent to Crete to do the hard work of converting a Sunday's worth of enthusiasm into a season's worth of tithes! Just call me Titus!

We first hear of Titus in the Book of Acts as the poster boy for the noncircumcision of Gentile converts who accompanied Paul to Jerusalem. After that merciful success, he became the key administrator of the collection for the saints in Jerusalem and later brokered a reconciliation between Paul and the divided Corinthian congregation. In our text this morning, Titus is the man on the ground charged with “putting things in order” among Christians on Crete. Known for their treachery and love of money, [or as Paul characterizes them, using words written by one of their own poets: “Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons”] Titus had his work cut out for him! For very different reasons, I have my work cut out for me this morning, because his charge is my own: putting things in order at the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill on a morning when the order of our individual lives will either strengthen or weaken the foundation of this house.

Let me say, in the first place, that the number you finally write on the pledge card now safely sealed in an envelope so as not to be affected by what I am about to say, the number has nothing to do with your opinions about any particular detail of the church's life or ministry or line item in the budget. That number has to do with the order of your life in relation to the God who has given you everything, simply everything!

Were I to follow Paul's advice to Titus concerning how he might put things in order, I would have to begin with a rebuke. Says Paul to Titus, “Rebuke them sharply, so that they may become sound in faith...For they profess to know God, but deny God by their actions. They are...unfit for any good work.” I would not go that far, but I would say this: unlike the members of the Presbyterian Church in Germantown who, when the times get tough, dig deeper into their limited resources to keep those around them from falling and their church's ministry from failing, we find every excuse in the world to give less. What I love about a visiting fireperson who happens to be your friend is that you get to hear on Sunday afternoon all of the cranky things said in your absence on Sunday morning. Lucky for you that she could not remember your names! Rebuke them, said Paul, which is to remove from your repertoire the reasons you do not give generously.

So to start with the least consequential, let us suppose we curtailed our hospitality and did away with donuts and cupcakes. When I arrived for my first interview with the search committee fifteen years ago, there was a notice posted in the ladies restroom that only one paper towel was necessary to dry my hands. That spirit was the spirit that prevailed and is always threatening to return us to the inhospitable reputation we once had on the Hill. By the way, I passed Eileen Jones as I was leaving First Germantown last Sunday and asked how things went on the Hill. She said, "Cindy, I couldn't believe it. People at Chestnut Hill were so warm and welcoming. I expected them to be cold" and then she put her nose in the air. Lest we profess to know God, but deny God by our actions, let us continue to be a congregation that entertains angels unawares.

The next excuse Nancy encountered for not doing business with your own stewardship had to do with the percentage of our mission giving. If you think members of the congregation should tithe, how about the church? It is a critical issue, for at the moment we are still \$20,000 away from the tithe we have always insisted on in our budget since I arrived. We budgeted \$91,000 for mission last year (not counting groceries, Sloppy Joes, backpacks, special offerings) and after freezing salaries and cutting program costs to the bone, we held back \$30,000 on the mission line item this year, choosing not to invade the endowment as we had in previous years. I said to you in February that we would restore \$30,000 to the mission budget by year's end. The question was how hard you would make us work to get that money out of your pocket. We have made up \$10,000 through the Fleazaar, a great effort that had nothing to do with your stewardship, but that is another sermon. If need be, we will make up another \$10,000 because I spent the first half of this year as the minister for the community side of our senior adult ministry, so we conservatively can take that much from the endowment for Senior Adult Ministry to cover my salary. But could you just explain the logic to me that says, "We are not giving enough to mission, therefore I am lowing my pledge!"? In other words, shrink the church to the size of my near-sighted vision so that nothing more will be asked of me. Do you have any idea how much this church could give away to things that are worth all of our lives if we actually became a church of people growing toward a tithe? Rebuke them sharply, said Paul to Titus, so that they may become sound in faith. For they profess to know God, but they deny him by their actions!

More than anything, of course, I heard the best solution to our budget crisis, the solution that was this church's modus operandi for years: fire staff. Some of you may remember Don Scott the minister? He was this church's yo-yo when I came, on and off and on the staff depending on the giving whims of the congregation. Let me make sure you understand what your pledge has to do with the four people who lead worship every Sunday. Matt Gaventa is free. We don't even pay this young man's mileage. The seminary pays for him. Brian is not even at Presbytery minimum and half of his salary is paid not by you but by an endowment that we are under obligation to spend until there is no one on this staff but a minister for older adults. Because we no longer had to pick up the tab for half of his salary, we were able to call Diane Fitch, part-time, to work in the area of Christian education. I daresay that the Christian education committee would wrestle you to the ground if you thought Diane were an expendable luxury. After a few months she was able to bring back our young families and children and revitalize every aspect of Christian education. But let me add that it is past time you as younger families began to give to this church as though its ministry were your responsibility and not the sole responsibility of your elders. Then there is yours truly. I have spent almost half of my ordained life with you and it has been a great privilege. For two years I have not taken a raise and God knows what this year will bring. Perhaps a younger, cheaper minister would solve the budget crisis in this church, but that would not address the issue of the order of

your financial life and your own stewardship. Rebuke them that they may become strong in faith, not just professing a belief in God but acting on that belief, said Paul to Titus.

The corollary to firing staff is the assertion that a reservoir of time exists in this congregation just waiting to be given to the church's ministry: why pay for it when we could get it for nothing! Between retired members who do not want to be tied down or who believe that they have given their all in the years when their children were in Strouse and the frazzled young families and singles who are run ragged by the world and blanch at the suggestion that they should spend their weekends running the church, I can only suggest again that you speak with the tireless volunteers who do run this church and are almost bald from tearing their hair out trying to get people to say "Yes" to ongoing commitments in ministry. Rebuke them sharply, says Paul, so that they may become sound in the faith.

The truth is, rebuke—though sometimes necessary to set the record straight—does not avail. Everything I have said thus far has nothing to do with stewardship. It is only an attempt to name and remove from us the excuses we use to keep us from true discipleship. What I have learned over these 35 years of ministry is that stewardship season is when people get cranky so that they can excuse themselves from their own personal responsibility before God by pointing the finger outside of themselves. Let me repeat what I said at the beginning: the number on your pledge card has nothing to do with your opinions about any particular detail of the church's life or line item in the budget. That number has to do with the order of your life in relation to the God who has given you everything, simply everything!

Therefore Paul goes on to tell Titus that he needs to address the personal lives of Christians in the community—in particular, older men, older women, younger men (younger women are not mentioned unless you include them in his mention of slaves), telling them to live lives that are self-controlled, upright and godly. Or as Paul writes to Titus at the end of the letter, "Let people learn to devote themselves to good works in order to meet urgent needs, so that they may not be unproductive": so that they may be of use. What I really know about each and every one of you is that you want to make a difference in the world. You want your one precious life to count for something. You want to be useful to God. The church is in the business of calling forth the gifts you have been given by God so that together we may be useful to God for the sake of the world God so loves. Put bluntly, the church is not a social service agency that exists to meet your needs or embody your desires: it is a community of disciples called out and into the world to live for others in Christ's name. Put simply, the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill is to be a beachhead for the kingdom until the kingdom comes. The good news? By God's grace, we already are. The hopeful news? We could be so much more. As we baptize little ones like Owen whose life will be a testimony to the oneness of Christ's church, as we send our children over to Strouse that their lives may be guided by the story of God's renovation of the world, as our young people decide where next to go in the world to be tangible beacons of hope, as our communities for the common good work to end gun violence and hunger and homelessness and illiteracy and work toward a planet that is as healthy as the people who walk upon it, as we fill the Center on the Hill and this whole building with hundreds of adults during the week and hundreds of girls every Saturday, as we gather on Sunday morning to wrestle honestly with the questions that will not let us go in the night, with the God who will not let us be in the light of day, as we sing praises to God and in our singing give the world just a taste of the heavenly chorus that will welcome us all around the banquet table that has been prepared for us, as we put our whole trust in God and so become the generous stewards we were created to be, we bear witness to him who was dead and behold: he lives in us!

In 1943, two years before his own execution, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote an essay to those who had been with him in the resistance for a decade. The essay ended with a question: Are we still of any use?

We have been silent witnesses of evil deeds; we have been drenched by many storms; we have learnt the arts of equivocation and pretence; experience has made us suspicious of others and kept us from being truthful and open; intolerant conflicts have worn us down and even made us cynical. Are we still of any use? What we shall need is not geniuses, or misanthropes, or clever tacticians, but plain, honest, straightforward men [and women]. Will our inward power of resistance be strong enough, and our honesty with ourselves remorseless enough, for us to find our way back...

...for this church to find her way forward? Because the order of our individual lives will either strengthen or weaken the foundation of this house, I beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, a life ordered by your tithe toward the God who has given you everything, simply everything, that together we may be of use. Thanks be to God.