

Dear Friends,

Welcome to the Stewardship Leadership dinner. Thank you very much for coming tonight and for your more than generous offers of support to the church.

It is somewhat ironic that I am asked to speak at this event, because I am far from the most spiritual person in our church, many of you would be much more qualified that way than I. As the song says, "If I am a Christian, I am the least of all". And Betty will confirm that it would very hard to confuse me with a generous person, and it is generosity toward the church that we seek tonight. Perhaps more to the point, while I am extremely grateful for the experiences that I have found at Newport, gratitude is not among the strongest reasons that I have for pledging support to our beloved church this year. Before going on however, I do want to acknowledge that the moral support that Newport has provided me and my family through difficult times, and high times, the wonderful and admirable people who I have met here, and the community and fulfillment that the church and the choir have provided, are much more than I will ever be able to repay,

But, I have even stronger reasons for supporting Newport now, and perhaps some of my thoughts and feelings will resonate with you. Perhaps, according to the Ecclesiastes text, this is the season for me to speak.

For many years it seemed that one would frequently hear the relevance of the church in modern times questioned. In the past decade, it seems like even that question has now faded. No one even asks any more. The church's doctrine is old, the meaningfulness of the words are confused by translation, by huge differences in life experience, and a seemingly unbridgeable gulf in social condition between biblical and current times. All of the text seems to be colored by the agenda of the authors who handed the stories to us through the ages.

Commenting on the declining prominence of the church and Christianity in modern life, I have heard very wise and thoughtful people say that despite the decline, one senses a yearning for moral support, for meaning in peoples' lives, for guidance, and for hope. Until recently, I viewed that observed longing and hope for deeper meaning as an abstract and esoteric portion of self-fulfillment that added incrementally to a generally high level of personal satisfaction among many people – icing on the cake. I believed that, for the most part, our culture consisted of people who have good values and who are satisfied with their lives. Along with that conception went a belief that there exists a code of ethics that underlies the way we function. For instance, we generally do not accept bribery, and we do accept many kinds of regulation within, our Laissez faire economy, to protect things that need protection.

Friends, in the last 2 or 3 years my faith in this underlying understanding has been deeply shaken, as I think it has for many people. We have seen our economic, political, and social leaders blatantly violate the ideals of duty, diligence, and obligation, in favor of arrogance, self-interest and especially greed. This has caused me to revise my prior view, to the point that I now think that the need for a moral understanding is not at all esoteric and abstract, it is fundamental to the way we live. I think that the greed which we have seen very nearly destroy a previously successful economic system, and the way our political leaders, of all persuasions, have pursued their power-lust instead of meeting the

responsibility that we placed in them, shows that the values of servitude, humility, fulfilling of obligations, and social responsibility, which I believe to be at the core of Jesus' message, desperately need to be reinforced. I believe that the withdrawal of Jesus' guiding message in our society is very like the de-regulation of the banking industry. The banking industry lasted about 10 years after deregulation, before short-sighted greed caused it to collapse. How long will our government last if our representatives continue to jeopardize the business of operating the government in favor of building their own power structures?

Leaving that joyful thought for a moment, I want to go back a few years to when I was a church elder. During that time the church took on a capital campaign, and remodeled the most heavily used parts of our church building. A theme and objective of the remodel was to make the structure reflect our key value that all are welcome here. Our intent was that visitors who didn't know the structure or layout of the church would feel comfortable and welcome whenever they chose to visit, whether youth, young families, middle-aged adults, elderly, whoever. During the last year of my tenure on Session, I began to vocalize my belief that we need to actively and intentionally promote membership. Our welcoming building will not welcome very many new people unless we explicitly invite people who are not already here to come in. I said then that I believed, and I still do, that many people in our neighborhoods would welcome and appreciate the basic, but apparently not so simple values, the theology, and the understanding that Newport espouses, if they knew what we were about. But they don't, and it is up to us to find ways to be visible in the community, and to make our message and our beliefs known in the local community.

Polls and news reports suggest that the disappointment, discontent, and frankly disgust, that I feel towards many of our society's current leaders is shared by many, including, I believe, many of our neighbors.

I see Newport as an antidote to those negative feelings. I see it as a place that embodies God, in the way people work together for social justice, for the poor and weak, and in the way that people support each other every way that they can. In my view Newport really can be a lamp to the feet of those who would act responsibly, morally, and justly, as well as a refuge to those who look for reinforcement of their ethical beliefs. In contrast to what I felt at the time I was an Elder, I now believe that the reason that Newport should make itself better known to the community, and should reach out to the community for membership, is as much or more for the health of the community as for the health of Newport.

I have one other thought regarding donation of funds to Newport, and that is on the topic of money. We don't talk about money very much, despite the fact that Jesus did, and there is a significant amount of Scripture on the topic. As you know, Jesus encouraged his close followers to give away their belongings to follow him. Jim has preached on these scriptures several times, and has, on the whole, let us off pretty easy. He has told us that we don't actually have to give away all of our possessions to be Christians. Nonetheless, Jim does serve as an example of a deeply and fundamentally non-materialistic person who lives his faith. My thoughts today are not so much about wealth, itself, or what kind of a

diet I can feed my camel to get him through the eye of that needle. Rather my thoughts are focused on how I feel about the things that I spend money on.

Think about the things that you spend money on, and how you actually feel about those things. Many things that we spend money on, I am neutral about – things that we really need like food and clothing, for instance. But even for those necessities, I certainly have more than I actually need, and it does bother me that some of the wonderful fruit and vegetables that I enjoy many times travel thousands of miles to get to my mouth. Some things I feel somewhat worse about: hobbies, such as biking, skiing, and woodworking, because I know that the money I spend on those things could be used for more essential things for people who really need them. Other things I feel terrible about spending money on. My son recently had his motorcycle impounded, and I felt terrible about the money spent getting that back, because it was so completely unnecessary and wasteful. Overall, I don't feel terribly bad about any of this, but it would be nice if some of my spending went for things that made me feel really good, strongly positive.

The point is that I actually feel great about the money that I give to Newport. I believe that the money that our church spends on mission projects is very effectively spent, and on very worthy causes. I believe that Newport spends its operating budget judiciously and wisely. And I believe that Newport's message and persona follow Christ's direction in acceptance and welcoming all, in striving to help the neediest, and in embracing humility and service over self-aggrandizement and pride.

So, whether your reasons center around gratitude, or whether, like me, you see Newport's values and message as being antidotal to the disappointing behaviors that have grabbed our headlines in recent years, or whether you seek to share some of your income in a way that expresses hope and love for things that you believe in, please join me in choosing to support stewardship at Newport this year in a big and generous way.

Thank you.