

**Sermon for Sunday, November 6, 2011**  
**Congregational United Church of Christ of Arlington Heights**  
**“Ready to Shine”**  
**Revelation 7:9-17 & Matthew 25: 1-13**  
**Rev. Rex E. Piercy**

First, it is good to be back. It really is. And yes, it was a fantastic experience. Thank you for the immense privilege you granted to me in this sabbatical time in 2011. You will be hearing lots more about it as the weeks go by, probably much more than you care to! But not today. Also a huge thanks to my sister in faith, friend, and colleague in ministry, the Rev. Connie Stewart, who gave you loving leadership and pastoral care in my absence and made my leaving and coming back about as uncomplicated as it could be. And additional thanks to Moderators Jeff Pattee and Gail Link and our Leadership Team of Deacons and Officers and our wonderful church staff – Pat, Sandy, and Norreen – all of whom saw you all through the months of September and October.

I know that during this time while I was away you had many and varied worship experiences. I am most eager to learn about your reactions and thoughts which can inform our Worship Planning Team in the months ahead. I am glad you had a chance last week in a 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Sacred Conversation to talk about all of this. As you know, worship is one of the nine stated values adopted by this congregation as going to the essence of who we are as a church. I trust that what you experienced and learned recently will help us to continue to offer “joyful praise of God with biblically centered worship

that is spiritually fulfilling and musically alive.”

But that is not today. Today is All Saints Sunday, which may just be for me the most lovely and meaningful celebration of faith that I know. And this Sunday is also, of course, smack dab in the middle of the eleven day run of the United Church of Christ’s exciting “Mission:1” effort. You have already written letters on behalf of the hungry and about better food policy reform; served one PADS homeless shelter meal and are ready for another this Thursday; and have already begun to bring non-perishable food donations for the local faith-based food pantry. As part of “Mission: 1” we are also receiving our UCC Special Mission Offering called Neighbors in Need today. That offering, as you may know, furthers the UCC’s commitment to justice and to the end of hunger in a nation and world of more than enough food. Normally this offering would be received on World Communion Sunday, the first Sunday of October, but this year it becomes a fitting part to the overall thrust of “Mission: 1.”

And as if this were not enough, there is yet another exciting layer to this mix in our worship today. Today marks the beginning of our annual Week of Stewardship reflection and commitment. I hope all of you will stay after worship (no coffee time today!) and instead join us for a pizza lunch and conversation about

stewardship downstairs in Fellowship Hall. We promise to make it fun and have you on the road home.

Now, with all this happening in one worship service, what's a preacher to do? While I did not craft this sermon while I was still in Ireland, I had developed some ideas for its direction, ideas which were later further refined by a request from your Church Council that my message today shine a light as it were on those twin aspects of our stewardship "trinity" which we call "Time" and "Talent." "Treasure," which is the third "T", while vital, of course to the ongoing life of our church's ministry both inside these doors and beyond them, will be the subject for your own prayerful, careful, thoughtful devotion and reflection this week. This is in keeping with the Principle of Christian Stewardship which has guided this church since its founding in 1959 and is enshrined in our congregation's guiding document, our Constitution:

*"Christian Stewardship," we affirm, "is the practice of systematic and proportionate giving of time, abilities and material possessions, based on the conviction that they are a trust from God to be used in His service for the benefit of all humankind in grateful acknowledgement of Christ's redeeming love. Returning a portion of God's gifts is an important act of our worship and faithfulness."*

If, as the statement says, your heart and mind is "convicted, " then the giving of your treasure, as well as your time and your talents, will flow as naturally as water in a stream which knows its source.

I do not need to tell you that the church – this church, every church – runs on the strength of its members who commit their financial and personal resources to its ministry. We make no apologies for this. When you became a covenant member of this congregation of the United Church of Christ you promised, and now I quote the vow, "to participate in the life and mission of this family of God's people, sharing regularly in the worship of God and enlisting in the work of this local church as it serves this community and the world," end of quote. Every one of you promised that! In short, you promised your prayers, your presence, your gifts and your service to Christ through this Church so that together we might continue to grow in the knowledge and love of God and be effective witnesses of our risen Savior.

No, we make no apologies about inviting your treasure, but also your time and talent in our mission to take God's word and work in to the world. But practically speaking, how does this happen? Well, it happens in several ways and places.

Your treasure of course comes in as you write the checks and place them in the offering plate when you worship. In some sense, that's the easiest one. But, what about your time and your talent? How is that given?

Well, most assuredly you give those things here, in this place, but they are also offered beyond the church doors in all the places where you "live and move and have your being." I think one of the biggest misperceptions is that "church work" only happens in the church. Au contraire!

Every one of you were "ordained" to Christian ministry by your baptismal initiation. Thus, your entire life is a ministry of offering time, skill, money, compassion, acceptance and presence, and that most assuredly doesn't just happen in a prayer closet or a Bible study! Your lives touch others in your homes, neighborhoods, communities and place of work, whether paid or volunteer. Discerning what the gifts of God you have received is an exciting thing, and while some of your gifts you develop and bring to the church, other of your gifts you have for Christ-like ministry which you offer and take with you to the school yard and the office and the factory and the nursing home room or wherever you may be. Your church stands ready to help you discern your gifts for ministry and to call them forth. This is to be an equipping place. As a pastor I have always rejoiced in the many and varied ways my congregants have served the wider community in roles as varied as village trustee, library volunteer, community activist, hospital volunteer, and on and on. There is a world of ministry outside the church and you make it happen with your passions and commitments.

Now that being said, while church work isn't something that just happens inside the church, some of it does happen in here and blessedly so. And thus we make no apologies for inviting you to engage in the work of the church that happens for the most part inside this building or on its behalf. It's a buffet of possibilities – serving on a ministry team, attending a small group, painting a church wall or

raking the church yard, setting up for a garage sale, providing coffee after worship, singing in the choir, working and teaching children and youth, and on and on.

We need you in here because Christianity is a shared faith. John Wesley once remarked there were no solitary Christians! Our faith occurs in community. And while some of the work of the church is hardly glamorous, all of it – at least we hope so – contributes something to the shared vision, story, values, hopes and dreams we have as a community of Christ that seeks to grow disciples - that's you! - for Christian service.

Every year at this time you get a pledge packet. And in it, along with your financial pledge form, is a "Time and Talent" form. This living, changing document tries to spell out some of the ways – but not all of them – by which you can serve God in Christ through the life of this faith community. It is very important, no it is a very, very, very important document – every bit as vital as that monetary pledge card you are also asked to prayerfully consider and return on Stewardship Sunday.

Bottom line, we are no different than Uncle Sam on that army recruitment poster: We need you! All of you! Every one of you! And actually, all of you need all of you. It's that one body, many parts thing Paul always talked about! Nothing happens, or at least not very much, without you. The church's ministry is your ministry. It doesn't belong to me as your Pastor. It doesn't belong to your

Moderators and the Council of Deacons and Officers. It's your ministry. You make it happen. Or not.

And that is why now more than ever I want you – each of you – from the youngest to the oldest – to reflect this week prayerfully on how you can serve, offering your time and talent, in and through this church in 2012.

Several years ago now we eliminated an antiquated and out-of-date committee structure with its set terms of office in favor of a new organizational model that is designed to invite ministry to flow from the grassroots, bubbling up from below, not trickling down from above. This spring at one of our 5<sup>th</sup> Sundays of Sacred Conversation, you told us that you weren't really sure you understood how things were supposed to work. Your church council is working hard to help you understand. If you don't, ask questions. But here is the bottom line....ministry – our ministry – what we do around here both externally and internally in Christ's name – is all in your hands. As blunt as it may sound, if you don't do, it won't get done! You get the idea. You're needed. You. Every one of you. Ministry is yours to share, grow, and do. That's it really.

So when you fill out that Time and Talent form and return it for blessing upon this altar table, it will be a guide to your Leadership Team as they seek to shepherd our common mission as a church in 2012. But know this, too. This document is not written in concrete, but sand. It's a marker, telling us where you find yourself right now, where you feel

God is calling you to serve right now. You can change your mind; go in new directions whenever the Spirit leads you. And this document filled out once in a week in November is not a hindrance to me or to your church leadership who might just pick up a phone or send you an email and say, "Hey, have you ever considered doing this?"

Stewards live as disciples of Jesus. In your baptism God claimed you and called you to a new life as a disciple of Jesus in the world. Not so long ago at a General Synod of the United Church of Christ, a resolution was passed called "Toward a New Vision of Giving." There we read these words:

Yes, my brothers and sisters, that is how we live – both here in the church and out there in the world – doing the work of the Lord of the Church which is both Christ's call and command – to show forth the love of God and neighbor in all we do, to all we meet.

On this All Saints Sunday when we remember all who have gone before us in this faith community and who, by their labors, built and sustained this "house of prayer and service" for over five decades now, we are summoned, each and all, to find ways, our ways to do Christ's work when it is both old and comfortable and new and challenging in 2012 and beyond. I can think of no better way for us to honor the saints than to engage in reflection about the time, talent and

treasure we will now offer the church. These last few days of "Mission: 1" also honor those saints as we strive to be one body in Christ seeking to confront the yoke of hunger in our community and in our world and to work for peace.

That pledge packet asking you to offer yourself and your resources for Christ and the church is a fitting devotion for a people who like the wise bridesmaids in Jesus' parable actually "get it" – we get that good stewardship of everything, including of this world, is the very best way not to miss how God is still speaking to us in the meantime as we await the day when the realm of God's love and justice fully arrives.

So fill them out, those pledge forms of time and talent and treasure, with an eye toward the healing of the world, caring for the earth we were given, offering your gifts in the transformation of an unjust society, reaching out in compassion to a world that is both physically and spiritually hungry. Do that and the work of the church will shine with God's love and justice and joy. And I doubt the nominating committee will have any trouble at all!

Let us pray:

God, as we honor the saints, as we engage in work and action to end hunger, as we reflect prayerfully this week on your many gifts to us and how we are called to be good stewards of them, grab our attention, rattle our hearts, feed our imaginations, and nourish our courage, so that we can let your light shine in every

corner of this world. In Christ we pray.  
Amen.