

Shiny gods - 1

Leviticus 19: 9-10 When you harvest your land's produce, you must not harvest all the way to the edge of your field; and don't gather up every remaining bit of your harvest. Also do not pick your vineyard clean or gather up all the grapes that have fallen there.

Matthew 6:19-21 "Stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth, where moth and rust eat them and where thieves break in and steal them. Instead, collect treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moth and rust don't eat them and where thieves don't break in and steal them.

Acts 4:32-35 The community of believers was one in heart and mind. None of them would say, "This is mine!" about any of their possessions, but held everything in common. The apostles continued to bear powerful witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and an abundance of grace was at work among them all. There were no needy persons among them. Those who owned properties or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds from the sales, ³⁵ and place them in the care and under the authority of the apostles. Then it was distributed to anyone who was in need.

Shiny gods - 1

I have an important announcement to make. We will turn out the lights, lock the doors, and permanently shut down First Pres on December 16, 2013.

That was the announcement I made at a congregational meeting almost four years ago in January of 2010. Back at the end of 2009 we were in a downward trend. We were losing members to death and moving away, but not adding new members. Pledges of offerings were dropping while expenses were increasing. We were faced with a stark choice. We could continue down the road we were on, thinking of this church as an aging and dying congregation. However, we know that if we keep on doing things the same way, we will continue to get the same results. Or, we could adopt a new self-image; we could think of ourselves as a new church start that was blessed with a building without a mortgage.

That was the challenge: change or die. The figures clearly predicted that we would shut the doors on December 16, 2013.

Change is uncomfortable. Change is hard. And change just for the sake of change is stupid. But we thought long and hard and we began to make gradual changes.

We took most of the mementos of the past and collected them in a history room. We wanted to honor the wonderful past of this congregation without giving new guests the impression that we were stuck in the past. We updated the hallway from the parking lot to make the first impression that people get less institutional and more welcoming.

We put up a new website with a brighter look and an active and cheerful presentation. We set up a Face book page to try to reach younger adults.

We've made changes in how we worship. Not only do we sing old favorite hymns, but also newer hymns that use contemporary English. We've gone from always using the traditional order of worship every Sunday, to varying the worship service in small ways to keep it fresh and engaging. I have gone from always wearing an academic robe and preaching in the pulpit to that being mostly done during formal periods of the church year and on special occasions. I generally dress less formally and to suit the season. Sermons are most often from the floor and have recently been without a full manuscript.

We started using video in worship, first to project liturgy from the bulletin, then sermon points were added, and occasionally a video clip is shown. The equipment has been upgraded so that the screen is easier to read, the equipment is less intrusive, and the choir can both see and hear like everyone else.

Not all of these were easy changes. But there are some changes that we welcome. Attendance is up 20% over the past four years, up 7.5% over just last year. We've had some infant baptisms and the first adult baptisms in a long time. We've added twenty-six new members in the last three years.

For several years we wished we had young families. For awhile, there were no children in the nursery, no children in Sunday School, and only two youth in Sunday morning class. Now, there are children in the nursery, two classes for children, and a youth class that has doubled in size. On top of that, the adult Sunday school class has grown too big for the parlor and has moved to Fellowship Hall and makes good use of the audio-video system for their lessons.

At one point we had one young family, Mitch and Julie. They did all they could to help us grow – and Aden and Dori are the wonderful result of their hard work. The Parents of Young Children group, known as POYC, was formed with three families and four children. That group has grown to six families with eleven children.

All the while, we continued to do major repairs on our facility. We put new flooring in the choir room. We put a new roof over the coffee area at the end of the hallway. We put a new roof on the sanctuary. We've just put a new roof on the building that houses our choir, nurseries, parlor, and offices.

A couple of weeks ago, a woman from the Seventh-Day Adventists came by the office to deliver the rent for the month. She said how much she admired this congregation. She said, "Y'all have a fantastic reputation for being involved in helping fill the needs of people in the community." She had noticed that we haven't just been focused on ourselves over the past few years. We have been a light, God's light to the community through our support of food pantries and the Shepherd's Inn for the homeless. Individually, we are participating in ministries all over town that feed people, house families, and heal the sick.

Brothers and sisters, December 16th is less than two months away and I have some good news. We are **not** closing the doors of First Pres.

All of this good news brings new challenges. We wanted growth and we are experiencing growth. We wanted younger families in order to be a well-rounded congregation and we are attracting younger families. We are getting what we have wanted and prayed for. And this change causes changes in our responsibilities. We're using air conditioning and heating in the upper floor above Fellowship Hall for the first time in a good while. We need nursery attendants for the little saints and what a wonderful need that is! These wonderful things increase our budget.

The littlest saints also need teachers. We have the responsibility to teach these children about God's love and about how we build God's kingdom with bricks of compassion. We pray that God's kingdom will come to earth like it already is in heaven. That kingdom is built with bricks of compassion held together with the mortar of love. To raise these children in the ways of the Lord we need to supply Sunday School lessons and Sunday School teachers.

And, while we are known for outreach to those in the community who are hurting, the sad truth is that that is only a small part of our budget. We are called by God to do more.

Today we will begin by examining the Old Testament lesson from the book of Leviticus. It talks about participating in God's work in an agricultural society. Don't harvest all of the crop on your land. Do not gather all of the grapes. Leave the edges and corners of your field un-harvested so that the poor and the stranger may eat.

There are two interesting principles in the regulations about harvesting. The first is that they never say how much you were to leave. It doesn't list a percentage of the crop to be left behind. But Moses did remind the people why they were to under-harvest. It was because "You were once slaves in Egypt." If you remembered what it felt like to be a slave, if you remembered what it felt like to be an outcast, if you remembered what it felt like to be hungry, then you would be generous in what you left for others.

We need to remember. Some of us need to remember what it felt like when we weren't part of a loving and caring Christian community. We need to remember how life had less purpose and less meaning before we became active in our faith. Some of us need to remember how we were in bondage to constant guilt in some church that only spoke of God's anger and never of God's steadfast love. Many of us need to remember what this community was like only a few short years ago when young families and tiny saints were missing in this congregation. Remember. Give thanks to God. Share generously.

Secondly, we need to recognize that we all harvest, whether we are farmers, or not. For some of us, the harvest is a paycheck, the harvest of our time and effort. Be generous in sharing your harvest.

Some of us no longer work. But, being retired doesn't mean you no longer harvest. Your harvest is your social security check. The benefits you receive are far greater than what you contributed over your working years.

Your harvest is the income from your investments. The temptation is to think of retirement income as pre-paid when it comes to giving to the Lord. Oh, we think, I was giving to the work of the church, I was supporting the body of Christ out of the same income that I was investing for my retirement and paying social security taxes. But the harsh reality is that most of retirement income isn't from what you set aside. No, most of retirement income is from the interest and dividends that accumulated over and above what you saved. And now you are reaping the harvest on what you sowed by saving.

Many of you are on a fixed income. You have fixed resources. So did the farmer in ancient Israel. His field was his resource and it was the same size each year. Land is a fixed resource, unchanging in size year after year. Do not keep all of your crop for yourself.

There are two lessons to be learned from what the text does not say. First, it does not say that if the harvest is poor, if it's a bad year, then you can harvest all the way to the edge of the field. One is to be generous and compassionate in both fat years and lean years.

Second, it makes no difference if your field is large or small. If you have a big field, a big income, share the harvest. If you have a small field, a small income, you, too, are to share the harvest.

Remember the example of the field in Leviticus 19. The field is a fixed resource and your resource may be fixed, as well. Your income may be large or small just as the field might be large or small. Either way, the command to not use all of the harvest for yourself applies. Whether your harvest is large or small, it does not all belong to you. And always remember your own blessings and be grateful and generous to others. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,
Remember the past and be grateful for the present.
Whether your field is large or small,
Whether your crop is bountiful or lean
In all circumstances, we must not keep it all for ourselves.
Instead, we must remember and share generously.

^{CEB} **Acts 5:1** However, a man named Ananias, along with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property. ² With his wife's knowledge, he withheld some of the proceeds from the sale. He brought the rest and placed it in the care and under the authority of the apostles.

³ Peter asked, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has influenced you to lie to the Holy Spirit by withholding some of the proceeds from the sale of your land?" ⁴ "Wasn't that property yours to keep? After you sold it, wasn't the money yours to do with whatever you wanted? What made you think of such a thing? You haven't lied to other people but to God!"

⁵ When Ananias heard these words, he dropped dead. Everyone who heard this conversation was terrified. ⁶ Some young men stood up, wrapped up his body, carried him out, and buried him.

⁷ About three hours later, his wife entered, but she didn't know what had happened to her husband.

⁸ Peter asked her, "Tell me, did you and your husband receive this price for the field?" She responded, "Yes, that's the amount."

⁹ He replied, "How could you scheme with each other to challenge the Lord's Spirit? Look! The feet of those who buried your husband are at the door. They will carry you out too." ¹⁰ At that very moment, she dropped dead at his feet. When the young men entered and found her dead, they carried her out and buried her with her husband.