

## IS IT TIME?

(Josh. 24:1-3a,14-25; Mt. 25:1-13)

During World War 2 Hollywood went to war with the rest of country. And when it did, the line between entertainment and propaganda inevitably got blurred. In some cases the line disappeared completely. Some of the movies Hollywood turned out were propaganda pure and simple.

Which isn't to say they were all bad. Some of them were pretty good, and some of best were directed by Frank Capra of *It's a Wonderful Life* fame. His series *Why We Fight* still turns up on one of the history channels once in a while. These were documentaries with a purpose: to influence opinion, change attitudes, and build support for war effort. And they worked.

There hasn't been anything quite like that since. There have been other war movies and documentaries, for sure. But none of the wars since World War 2 has produced anything like Frank Capra's classics.

In fact, most of the movies made about wars since World War 2 would turn the title of Capra's series into a question: Not *Why We Fight* but *Why Do We Fight?* And most of the time there hasn't been a good or honest answer to that question. But it's always imperative that we to ask that question and to ask whether the case has really been made that war is the only answer.

But that's not where I'm going this morning. Instead, I want to focus on something closer to home.

As you know – or if you don't know already, you'll know pretty soon, November is stewardship season at West Parish Church. The annual Stewardship letter is going out soon, the Stewardship lunch is next Sunday after worship, and Stewardship Sunday when we hand in our pledge cards is the following Sunday. So the focus today is a variation on Frank Capra's theme: *Why We Give*.

And to be honest, yes, there's some propaganda involved. I do want to influence opinions, change attitudes, and build support for the church's ministry efforts. I admit the propaganda element, but don't apologize for it.

It's clear from the New Testament that stewardship sermons are as old as the church. I am curious, though: what did preachers in New England do back in the days when the Congregational church was supported by taxes? Did Jonathan Edwards preach stewardship sermons in out there in Northampton? Did Cotton Mather ever preach a stewardship sermon in Boston? Did their churches have pledge drives?

It must have been nice in a way not to wonder where the money was going to come from and to be able to count on the legislature to guarantee funding. In fact, one of great worries when the Congregational Church was disestablished in 1833 was what would happen once churches had to depend on their members to support them voluntarily. Of course what happened was they started having pledge drives and asking members to ante up.

Today's reading from the book of Joshua isn't about giving money. There are plenty of stewardship texts in the Bible, but this isn't one of them. It is a text, though, that tells us something about our motivation for giving.

The Israelites have conquered all of Canaan. The promised land is theirs. After all those years, God's promise to Abraham has finally come true. So what does Joshua do? He gathers all the tribes at Shechem to renew the covenant, to renew their pledge to serve God: *Choose this day whom you will serve*. And the Israelites (at least for that one day) enthusiastically respond: *Far be it from us to forsake Yahweh, who brought us out of Egypt and protected us and gave us this land*.

It's not too hard to understand what motivated their enthusiastic response. It was gratitude, pure and simple. That's what prompted the Israelites to pledge allegiance to God. It wasn't the prospect of something better down the road. It wasn't guilt. It was plain old gratitude. God has done wonderful things for us, and we need to show God how grateful we are. We can't possibly repay the debt, but we can at least acknowledge it.

To be honest, pledge drives all too often run on guilt. "You had better give more or else," followed by a whole litany of bad things that will happen if you don't.

That's probably natural when we're faced with having to make hard choices and when we know the consequences of an unsuccessful pledge campaign. Hard choices get even harder.

The UCC's stewardship theme this year is *Count Yourself Blessed*, which is as far away from guilt as you can get.

The first word on stewardship ever spoken to a church is something Paul wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians: *Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work* (2 Cor. 9:7-8).

It seems we never have a problem asking God for things. That we always remember. It seems to come naturally.

But sometimes we forget to thank God. Sometimes we forget to show our gratitude

Too often we're like the mother in a story Winston Churchill told. A sailor jumped into Plymouth harbor (that's Plymouth, England) to rescue a drowning boy. Sometime later the boy was walking through town with his mother when he saw the gallant sailor and nudged mother and said, "That's the sailor who saved my life." Mum marched right up to man: "Are you the one who rescued my boy this morning?" "Yes, ma'am," he modestly replied. "Then where's his cap?" the mother indignantly demanded.

God gives us a wonderful gift, and we complain that the ribbon's the wrong color.

Why can't our attitude be more like that of the man who woke up one morning with the birds singing their hearts out, the air filled with the scents and sounds of summer, the warm sunshine coming through the bedroom window,

geraniums blooming in window box outside. As he lay there drinking in beauty of the new day, feeling that life had been good to him beyond anything he deserved, he felt the urge to do something for others. "I must not accept this happiness as a matter of course;" he thought, "I must do something in return."

That day he picked up a magazine that had an article about the urgent need for medical help in Africa. He was a musician, a philosopher, and a theologian and didn't know anything about medicine. But at age 30 he enrolled in medical school, and seven years later Dr. Albert Schweitzer was on his way to Africa.

His friends and family thought he was out of his mind. But Albert Schweitzer couldn't simply take his blessings for granted. His gratitude overflowed in a life of service to some of the poorest and neediest people in the world.

Pledge Sunday is coming up in two weeks. When we fill out our pledge cards, will we remember all the ways God has blessed us and do it out of a sense of gratitude? Will we ask, "Is my pledge a true expression of my gratitude?"

At the risk of scaring Stewardship: don't even think about the church budget. Or at least don't let that be the first thing you think about. Instead, think what God has done for you and what you need to do to show your gratitude. That should be the only motive – not guilt or worry about the church.

And then give cheerfully and joyfully and gratefully. If we all do that, the church will be just fine.