

'Redeemed by Grace'  
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based on 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13 and Matthew 23:1-12

Years ago I was working with my former church's new Treasurer ... he was new to the job as Church Treasurer but was really financially savvy. He owned his own small business and was quite successful at it. He knew how to manage money and build a business.

He asked how we built our budget and what matrix did we use to evaluate various items that needed to be costed as individual line items. He wanted to delegate where the money was going and where it was coming from as a way of appropriately allocating the income to expense ratio.

I looked at him kinda funny and said, "Well ... every fall we ask people to tell us how much money they plan to give to the church in the next year and then fill in the blank with faith."

He looked back at me with this incredulous look on his face. I've never forgotten his response. He said, "You know, Ann, if I ran my small business the way you run your church I'd be out of business."

Would you please pray with me?

Awesome God, we look to you this day searching for the balance between tending to the business of the church and tending to God's gift of redeeming grace.

Help us to be mindful of the resources you have blessed us with and the ways we tend to them. Show us through your Word how to balance fiduciary responsibility with the ministry of grace ... in our church and in our lives.

In Jesus' loving name we pray. Amen.

Running a business and running a church does have similarities when it comes to managing money. We are both concerned about waste or inappropriate spending ... and we both value the income side of the ledger.

But the key difference between a business and a church is that a business's primary objective is to make money; and a church's primary objective is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

That changes the way we distribute the Balance Sheet.

We've been talking the last few weeks about eight Ministry Initiatives we're going to focus on in 2018. There is one ministry we didn't talk about. That is the 'Ministry of Convening'.

The Rockefeller Foundation recently conducted a two-year study on convening ... they called the study: '*Gather: the Art and Science of Effective Convening*' – a unique guidebook for convening planners and change agents interested in harnessing

the potential of collective intelligence through in-person convening.

Listen to their five points on effective convening and see if it doesn't remind you of what we're doing right now in worship.

1. determine whether or not to host a convening
2. clarify a purpose for convening that shapes all other decisions
3. build an effective team
4. curate an experience, and
5. ensure follow through for impact.

[<https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/report/gather-the-art-and-science-of-effective-convening/>]

This gathering for a purpose is the kind of convening Derek Nelson wrote about in an article called 'The ministry of convening'. ... and the comment that sticks out for me in his article was when he wrote, "Congregations are God's best idea for the healing of the cosmos." ... and that healing is done through regular, purposeful, transforming convening.

... and so when we look at the difference between operating a business and operating a church ... the church seeks out ways to engage in the healing of the cosmos. We do that corporately and individually.

In that act of healing, we do not lead God in ministry ... God leads us.

In our worship ... and through our ministry initiatives ... we get our direction and purpose from God and live it with our lives.

That is why sometimes the nuts and bolts of budgeting matrix and income/expense delegation can seem at odds with our faithful convening. We are not led by a Board of Directors; we are led by God.

Now that you are all ready to believe the church is different from a business ... believe it or not, we need both in order to build a church. What it requires us to find that fulcrum, or tipping point, when we discover we've relied too much on grace (and got a little lazy) and not enough on fiduciary responsibility and the brains God gives us to rationalize when we have to incorporate reason with faith.

In one of his most direct confrontations with the Temple authorities, Jesus accuses them of saying one thing and doing another.

Jesus doesn't offer a parable to get people thinking ... he point blank accuses the scribes and Pharisees of leaning too far into the status and power play of fiduciary responsibilities and financial realities that comes with maintaining a Temple and not relying enough on God's ministry of redeeming grace.

The Temple was a huge structure that required a lot of maintenance. Besides caring for the Temple, the porticoes, the holy of holies ... the Temple also had to be cleaned, supplied and staffed. The priests needed to be paid. Then there was the annoying Temple tax that kept the Roman Empire happy.

We like to make the scribes and Pharisees out to be the demons, but perhaps they were just guilty of trying to maintain an aging Jewish hierarchy that grew too big

for its budget. The matrix of individual line items exceeded anticipated growth and they could no longer appropriately allocate a balanced income to expense ratio.

Their problem was deeper than just a building ... the scribes and Pharisees represented a business model that favored the stockholders and not the people.

The scribes and Pharisees had forgotten how to be humble.

Jesus told the people there's a better way. Don't do as the scribes and Pharisees who have forgotten the humility of God's redeeming grace ... but live your lives true to God's abundant promise ... to be faithful, steadfast and good. Not just to those who could pay the Temple tax ... but to everyone.

The Apostle Paul did the same kind of encouragement to the new believers in his letter to the Thessalonians. He told them he never wanted to be such a burden they felt taxed in their support of his sharing with them the good news of Jesus.

He said there was no ulterior motive in his desire to share God's redeeming grace. Therefore the early church was to be encouraged and hold fast to the faith.

That is our lesson for us today. We all struggle in some form of financial distress. There never seems to be enough and (unless any of you have won the lottery lately) I suspect it is a challenge to make ends meet. We worry about what the future holds.

But Jesus encourages us to be faithful to our call. Be faithful to our ministry initiatives. Face our realities with something the business world doesn't have: faith.

... and so as we move forward into ministry in 2018 we do so with our feet planted firmly in God's ministry of redeeming grace as well as in the fiscal realities that beset our congregation of convening in this (soon to be) 100 year old building.

We are saved from falling into the pit of distraction from our call because when we convene regularly we are participating in God's best idea for the healing of the cosmos.

Will all this keep me from writing you a letter in the next week asking for you to prayerfully consider what your financial commitments will be in 2018 as we embark on some truly bold and risky ministry initiatives?

No. ... and not because I'm caving to a budget matrix that delegates where the money is going and where it is coming from as a way of appropriately allocating the income to expense ratio.

... but because I trust God's faithfulness and steadfast gift of redeeming grace that guides our hearts and our minds and our giving... not as a small business, but as a congregation who convenes for the purpose of transforming the world.

Be encouraged! You are called, loved, and redeemed by grace.

Thanks be to God! Amen.