

*New Testament: Philippians 4:12-13*

*word count 2,057*

**Veterans' Day—*Our veterans are invited to stand and be recognized for their service.***

On June 22, 1972, an enormous flood covered the cities of Elmira and Corning in upstate New York. The rains came, and the creeks and rivers rose up over their banks. By 9:00 p.m., all city employees were ordered down to the riverbanks to fill sandbags and place them where they might stave off the swelling waters. Soon after, radio calls went out to able-bodied citizens to come and help in the sandbagging to save the Chemung River Valley, after the steady days of rain, from the path of destruction.

The banks gave way, and in a steady rush, the waters took over the streets and poured into homes, even tearing some apart. People fled, and pets climbed up onto any high surface they could find to be out of the water. Others moved upstairs, bringing cherished items from the first floors, piece by piece, into upper rooms and attics.

At its peak, the flood carried away the southern spans of the Walnut Street Bridge, built back in 1896. The local lumber company was swept away by the current. Porches and garages were ripped loose, and siding was torn from the houses by a destructive riptide. At one home in Elmira, a downed tree smashed through the windows of a living room, and some unopened merchandise from a destroyed department store in nearby Corning floated in and rested in the branches.

Downtown was completely hit, and the flood knocked out important utilities such as water, power, and telephone. All of the churches downtown were damaged, so congregations met at churches outside of the flood zone, such as the First Presbyterian and the Southside Baptist Church. Amazingly, not a single person was killed.

My UCC church in nearby Binghamton was called by our local association of churches and asked to send carloads of volunteers to help our neighbors. I was seventeen, and my parents drove me to my church to be picked up and taken to where the flooding had just receded. A volunteer on our team was a young man in his twenties who had started to attend church alone, and who seemed set apart in some way I could not understand, by the congregation. He knew the area we were going to, and helped navigate the station wagon full of volunteers to the site.

Once there, we could see exactly what a natural disaster could do. We were assigned to a block where the garages of two houses that faced each other had floated across the street and more or less exchanged positions. Lifetimes of belongings and memories were piled in soggy brown stacks at curbs, and the trucks were coming through to pick up waterlogged sofas and chairs, photo albums, lamps, dishes and more. There was an unpleasant smell of moisture, mud and decay everywhere. The water had risen to within inches of the first floor ceiling of the house where two of us were assigned, and the cheerful owner came out to greet both me and the young man who had navigated us to this neighborhood. I told him how sorry I was and that we would be careful with the destroyed items in his house, and I will never forget his response: He laughed. He laughed, and told us to just take the old stuff and chuck it onto the curb with the rest of the trash. He patted the old upright piano and said that it had been in his family for years, but now it just needed to go outside to be picked up. His wife came downstairs and asked, "Do you want to see what wasn't lost?" We climbed the stairs to see the second floor untouched, just inches above the water line that formed a border around the living room ceiling.

The man told us that he had gone from worrying about his property and things, to finding a tremendous spirit in his family and neighbors; there was a realization that there is so much to life that is more important than stuff, that even if the flood had destroyed it all, it would have left them with the open and obvious answer to what might have seemed to be a big secret—that life is more precious than anyone can know, and it is in sharing what brings us together that any riches in life are found.

When we left Elmira, we all had similar stories to tell. It had been a giant surprise block party, and the neighbors were grateful that we were invited, but even more grateful to discover the spirit of something greater inside each of them that came from sharing what they had with each other under such adverse conditions. It took a flood to let the residents of this particular block to know that in times of plenty and in the suddenness of having little, they could do all things in the strength they found somewhere that was deep within them all the time.

My experience in volunteering through my church taught me something about finding a better part of myself; and that which is the best in us is always the part we give away. The block party on that street in Elmira, New York, and my part in it reminds me of what the apostle Paul was saying to the Philippians; “I know what it is to have little, and what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances, I have learned the secret of being well-fed and going hungry. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

Here is the scripture that says so much about the source of our own strength in both good and hard times that enables us to do whatever needs to be done. Here are Paul’s words, ready to help me wind this down into the proper kind of Stewardship sermon that we have every year on this Sunday, where I ask you to give of your heart. Except the story doesn’t end here, so I ask your forgiveness if I need to say a little more.

On June 25, 1972, just three days after the floods and during the time we were there to help, the United Church of Christ became the first to ordain a gay clergyman. The effect rippled through our churches in a number of ways. I can only assume that this was the event that emboldened that quiet young man who always seemed to be kept at a distance by the congregation, to come and speak with our pastor about his place in the church. I overheard my pastor say to my father, “What could I say? I had to tell him that he would not feel comfortable here.” After thinking about how that church volunteer who just wanted to be a part of the welcome table had disappeared, about a year later I left the church as well for several years.

How many of you have left the church at one time or another? How many of you have felt judgment, prejudice, or the smallness of spirit in people who are drawn to the greater Spirit, but know not what it means to act in a Christ-like manner? How many of you have sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, cousins and friends—who feel the need to know that God loves them, and that they are welcome at this party; this place made safe because the Christians around them are focused on the joy of God’s astounding grace rather than the ticking off of legalisms that were set aside in the first place? And where are the few places today that extend the radical welcome of Christ; that proclaim, “Whoever you are and wherever you are on your journey, you are welcome here,” and mean it?

This is why you will find the UCC TV ad on our web page, depicting bouncers excluding the people they don’t think “fit in” from getting into church. This is why it is so personal to me.

The church is where I learned about grace. It is where I learned about giving, sharing, being a part of a diverse community, and about being accepted and loved and about accepting and loving others just as they are. It is where I feel that I can bring my whole self before God and develop that relationship while feeling free to have questions about what that relationship actually means. It is also the place that taught me about forgiveness.

There is a church like that in Orange County, and you are the caretakers of that special place where guided by God's unconditional love as taught by Jesus Christ, we see ourselves as children of one God, brothers and sisters of all people. Today is the day that I ask you to recognize that in the tangible form of your financial pledges of support to your church.

At second service, we sing, "We give you but your own." As we sing it each week, I wonder if it becomes so much of a ritual that we forget that we are lifting up very real words of gratitude in the form of pledging to give back the bounty that we receive in the gifts of the spirit every day. It is not about the "stuff"—that which someday is hauled to the curb or given away when we realize that it is not that important; but about what the man in the waterlogged house in Elmira might call the "big secret"—that life is more precious than anyone can know. As Paul says, "I know what it is to have little, and what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and going hungry. I can do all things through God who strengthens me."

The author of this hymn, Bishop William How, also wrote the hymn we sang last week, "For All the Saints." He spent his life working in the poorer parishes of England that he might improve the spiritual condition of his people, inspiring many to join him in the effort.

It was a surprise party for the church that he pastored, where the poor of his parish learned that they were special and loved despite their personal finances, and through feeling that love, their church grew and prospered.

It was a surprise party for the Philippians who believed Paul's promise that contentment with available resources and an intentional focus on the true, honorable, just, pure and excellent would spread peace past human understanding.

We are open about who we are as a church, and there are no secrets about how we operate. Go to our website and you can learn how we support the mission of the church, nationally and locally. You can also read our ministry budgets, salaries and how much the electric bill is. As you have indicated that you like transparency, go to the Stewardship page in your program and see where you support the church among the 120 families that pledged last year. Prayerfully consider what it means to you to have a church home like this one, and feel free to make or even amend your pledge today.

But don't give to the church for the heating bill or for a repaired parking lot. Give because you feel a revival of spirit when you walk into this place. Don't give because the budget needs feeding—give because you feel fed here and want others to feel the same way. Are there people here today that feel grateful for this church? For the spiritual connection? Community? A safe place to be who you are?

For me—it's personal. There have to be spiritual oases in today's Christianist wilderness, and I deeply need to help keep them watered and growing. We have made *our* pledge because we believe this is the place where people can find an answer to what might have seemed to be a big secret. And that is simply this—that life is more precious than anyone can know, that Christ points us towards loving God and each other, and it is in sharing in a place where we are surprised to see that all are welcome to God's big party where the riches in life are found; where you yourself belong. Can I hear an AMEN?

### **Scripture for Stewardship Sunday, November 11, 2007**

#### **Philippians 4:12-13**

"I know what it is to have little, and what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and going hungry. I can do all things through God who strengthens me."