

First Presbyterian Church – Charlotte, NC
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Rev. Chuck Williamson

Engage

Genesis 1:1-5; Matthew 22:15-22

I'm sure that by now you have figured out that the theme for this year's stewardship season is "Engage". In the stewardship packet that was sent out to the members of the church this past week, I counted 13 times that some form of the word "engage" appeared in those materials. ENGAGE.

A month or so ago, when I first learned that this was to be our theme for stewardship, I started thinking about the various ways we use that word—engage—in our daily conversation.

For example, we talk about two persons that are engaged to be married. When a couple is engaged to be married, what they are saying about themselves is that they love each other so much that they want to spend the rest of their lives together. When we use the word "engage" in that sense, we are saying something about love, about commitment, about important, lasting relationships.

We also use the word other ways. When we are driving the car, we say that the transmission is engaged. That is, when the transmission is engaged, we are not just sitting in neutral, idling, motor running but not going anywhere. No, when the gears are engaged, we are moving, we are making progress, we are getting closer to our destination.

When the gears are engaged, it's something like this: what one gear does affects what the other gear does. When the gears are disengaged, one may be moving, but it has no impact on the other. It's only when the gears are engaged, that what one does has an influence on what the other does. So this word says something about interactions, connections.

Still another way we use the word. We speak of someone who is an engaging person: "She has an engaging personality" ... "He has an engaging way about him." When we use the word this way, we are saying that we find that person, that thing, that idea captivating. It captures our imagination. It draws us in and makes us want to know more.

As I've thought about the variety of ways that we use the word "engage", the more I've come to see how that word is a perfect stewardship word.

So with all that as something of a jumping off point, let's look at a couple of scripture passages.

First is from the gospel of Matthew.

Matthew 22:15-22

OK, here's what's going on. It's Wednesday of the last week of Jesus' life. In two days, Jesus will be dead. Those who are plotting against Jesus are ramping up the pressure, turning up the heat. And here in these verses they are setting a trap to lure Jesus into saying something that will get him in trouble. So after buttering him

up with some insincere flattery, they ask this innocent sounding question: “Is it right for us to pay taxes?”

Now that sounds like a pretty straightforward question, but it’s really a trap. Because if Jesus says that they should not pay the taxes, then that will get Jesus in trouble with the Roman authorities. If, on the other hand, Jesus says that they should pay the taxes, then that’s going to get him in trouble with those who despise the Romans and want to be out from under Roman rule. So whichever way Jesus answers, he’s going to be in trouble with somebody. It’s a pretty clever trap.

But Jesus saw the trap, and turned the tables on his questioners. He said, “Bring me a coin.” And someone hands Jesus a coin.

Now I’ve tried to picture what this scene might have looked like. It could be that Jesus took the coin in his hand and held it out for the people to see. But I picture it differently. I think that Jesus took the coin, held it up like this, and asked, “Whose image do you see?” Do you focus your attention on the coin stamped with the image of Caesar, or do you focus your attention on Jesus, stamped with the image of God? Which one do you see?

Which one of those do you find more engaging—the coin or the Christ? Which one captures your imagination? Which one do you find captivating? Which one draws you in and makes you want to know more? I think it’s safe to say that there are not very many people who find the idea of paying taxes all that captivating, all that engaging. But through the centuries, there have been millions upon millions of people who have been captivated by Jesus. And what do those people captivated by Jesus do? They do what Jesus told them to do; they give. Jesus said, “Give to Caesar the things that belong to Caesar, and give to God the things that belong to God.”

We, who have been drawn in by the grace of God, shown through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, what do we do? We give. We give ourselves. We have been blessed by the abundant mercy of God that loves and forgives even a bunch of sinners like you and me, and that mercy engages us, captivates us. And in grateful response, we give. We give to God the things that belong to God, and the truth is that everything we have belongs to God. So we give.

There’s the line from the hymn that says, “Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.” In response to God’s love for us, we give ourselves to God.

And here’s what happens when someone is captivated by Jesus: that person falls in love with Jesus. The more time we spend with Jesus, the more time we want to spend with Jesus. One of the images that the New Testament uses to describe the church is “the bride of Christ.” It’s that we who are in the church have said, in so many words, “I love you, Jesus, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you.” The more we are with Jesus, the more we want our relationship with Jesus to grow. So can you think of ways that we can grow our relationship with Jesus?

Let me throw out another scripture passage. This is Matthew 6:21, where Jesus says, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

I think that for most of my life, I have read that verse backwards: where your heart is, there your treasure will be. Well, of course that’s so. That’s kind of a no-brainer; of course we are going to spend our money, we are going to put our

treasure toward those things that we love. But this verse actually says something quite different. It says, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Which is to say that our love goes to those places where we have put our treasure. Or, to put it more bluntly, if you want to love God more, give more. If you want your relationship with God to grow, one thing you can do is to grow in your giving, to give more. Because your heart is going to follow where you place your treasure. There is a direct connection between what we do with our treasure and the love we have for God.

Think again about that image of engaging the transmission. When the transmission of our car is engaged, we are going somewhere; we are moving; we are heading toward a destination. The same is true as we engage with Jesus through our giving: we are going somewhere; we are growing in our love for Jesus. And we are helping the church to move toward that destination to which we believe God is calling us.

So, at risk of going from preaching to meddling, I want to say a few things about our giving. I think that for many of us, we look at our giving to the church like this: the church ended the year in the black; I got what I wanted from the church; therefore, I must have given enough. The easiest thing for us to do when we fill out our pledge card is to say, "Just put me down for what I gave last year." But when we take that approach, our gears are not engaged, we are not moving forward; we are just idling. The motor's running, but we aren't going anywhere.

This year your Stewardship Committee decided to make an intentional effort to get you to engage your gears and to move forward. So when you received your pledge card in the mail, you were given a couple of pieces of information. For those who have made a pledge in the past, they were reminded of that pledge and they were encouraged to increase that pledge by 5%, 7%, 10%. And for those who have not pledged in the past, they were given a figure that shows the average gift of someone in their age group—on average, people in their 20s give X amount; people in their 30s give Y amount, and so on. And they have been asked to think of that as a benchmark, a starting point, as they think about our giving to the church for 2015.

All of this is a way to help you engage, to get your gears working and then to move forward.

One thing that we learned last week when Al Riddick, the chair of the Stewardship Committee, gave his report is that in 2014, only slightly more than one-half of our members made a pledge for the work of the church. If we continue at that level of commitment, it's pretty much a guarantee that we will have a hard time moving forward, undertaking the work that we believe God has given us to do here in the heart of Charlotte.

So why is it so important that we make a pledge? In the past I have heard people say, "I don't make a pledge because I work on commission, and I don't know what I'm going to be making next year, so I'll just give what I can." I understand that, but what you need to remember is that a pledge card is not a legal document. We are not going to take you to court for failure to pay if you are unable to meet your pledge. But making a pledge does two things that are very important: 1) it keeps before you the reminder that you have made a commitment, and it serves as an encouragement to do what you said you were going to do; and 2) your pledges are

invaluable for the church as we set the budget for 2015. Your pledges give our Finance Committee a ballpark amount that we will have to work with next year, and knowing that we are able to fund our programs and ministries accordingly.

One last thing and then I'll sit down. There is one more way we ask you to engage and move forward in your giving. We are asking that you make giving to First Presbyterian Church your number one giving priority. I know that there are many worthwhile organizations out there that are deserving of our financial support. But I would be willing to bet that there is none of those organizations in which you are as fully engaged—heart and mind and soul and body—as you are here at First Presbyterian Church. And so, let your love for the church and your desire to be Christ's disciple be reflected in your giving. If you give more to the church, I assure you that your love for the church will grow also.

So...ENGAGE. Get it in gear and move forward as you show your love for Jesus through your giving. Let our captivating, engaging Savior touch your heart; fall in love with him. Then let your love for Christ overflow into all that you do. Amen.☐