

Show and Tell

by Bill Miller

“But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.” ~James 2:18



There are some times I wish I could simply blend in with the back pew and plead the fifth, not wanting to call attention to myself, my actions, or especially to my selfish actions!

However, as a church leader, I often find myself up front and center, standing in a pulpit or behind an altar. I don't particularly enjoy the spotlight when it comes to getting up close and personal about my stewardship practices. But over the years I have figured out that I have to come clean with the honest to God truth about my own commitment and giving if I expect anyone else to do likewise. When it comes time make a pledge, as much as I'd like to exit stage left, I am left with no choice but to take the lead, and personally participate in stewardship show and tell.

Several years ago we worked with a consultant at historic Trinity Church, Houston, on a major capital campaign to restore and renovate our long-neglected building. Our consultant informed me that on the big day when we would ask everyone to participate, I would have to step up to the pulpit (and the plate) and tell my people exactly how much I was going to give. No pressure there, huh? I hemmed and hawed and tried to figure out a way to be less personal and precise, but he would not let me off the hook. After thinking hard about it and praying even harder, I decided that a pledge of \$10,000, beyond my ongoing regular pledge (which was a tithe) would be about right – generous and sacrificial enough to cause me to make some changes in my lifestyle and spending habits. I figured out that if it was going to make a difference, then it had to make a difference.

Before the big day came I consulted with my dog Sam, the only other member of my family with any capital to spend, and he agreed to stand tail to tail with me and give “two large bones” including his favorite one and another that “still contained quite a bit of meat.” I was able to tell my folks how uncomfortable I was sharing such personal information - but being able to share Sam’s significant and sacrificial pledge made everyone, including myself, feel much more comfortable. There was an audible gasp when I revealed my pledge, which I figured out later meant, “Oh no, that’s great, and now it means I might have to do the same!” My personal testimony was not the only reason we raised \$3 million, but it helped. Several people said that knowing Sam and I were “all in” motivated them to do the same.

We don’t have to be obnoxious about it and I always inject a little humor and humility when I share such things, including the heartfelt realization that I could always do much more, and that I have yet to fill the shoes of those truly generous people who have inspired me over time. Nonetheless, specificity in terms of my own stewardship practices seems to be an important part of the process of creating a community of generous givers. I am still uncomfortable with sharing such personal information – just uncomfortable enough to keep motivating me toward a higher level of generosity. And sometimes I know that my personal sharing makes others just uncomfortable enough to do the same.

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