

"Everyone's Support Is Needed!"

DO YOU RECALL the famous story of "Peter Pan," which was made into a 1954 musical, and into a movie, most recently in 2003? As a child growing up in the 1950's, I recall watching that musical on television. In that musical, Mary Martin, played the part of Peter Pan, the young boy who could fly, but who just refused to grow up.

In those early years of my life, I was just spellbound watching Peter, as he repeatedly flew back and forth across the stage, without any means of support.

To me, it was enchanting and mystifying, to see someone swoop around like that in mid-air. In fact, I loved it, as it was very much the stuff of magic wands and fairy castles. In a way, perhaps Peter Pan was the Harry Potter of my childhood.

Through the years, I've recalled that musical with fondness. But, as I've grown older, here's what has changed for me. Where once I saw only the magic of Peter flying, now I understand that that special magic depended upon some kind of support.

Yes, Mary Martin could fly. But, she could only do that, because she was held up, by nearly-invisible cords, which ran along a track in the ceiling of the stage she was acting on.

Without those supporting cords, it wouldn't have been possible, for audiences, including myself, to thrill at the magic of Peter Pan. As I've read, even in the more recent 2003 Peter Pan movie, it was still necessary in some scenes, for Peter's flying to be supported by such hidden cords. It was still necessary, even in our modern era with deceptive, computer image enhancements.

Coming to church this morning, you probably never expected to hear about Peter Pan--either in the 1950's musical or the newer movie. After all, what does this morning's Loyalty Sunday theme have to do with Peter Pan?

If you are wondering about that, I assure you. There is a "method to my madness." Consider this.

Many of us modern Christians marvel at the record of Jesus' ministry almost 2,000 years ago, which is depicted in our New Testament. We marvel at:

- all the towns Jesus visited in the course of that ministry,
- all the people Jesus healed,
- all the great teachings Jesus delivered, and
- all the miracles Jesus performed.

The New Testament presents a grand record of what Jesus and his disciples were able to accomplish across Palestine, in possibly just three years' time. But here's the thing.

MANY MODERN CHRISTIANS make a mistake. They view Jesus' earthly ministry, much as I first viewed Peter Pan's flying. They view Jesus' earthly ministry as though it was accomplished, completely without any means of support.

I'll put it another way. Many modern Christians fail to see, the extent to which Jesus' ministry, was dependent on both the good will and the material contributions of other people.

Very often we think of Jesus and his disciples as traveling across Palestine, and performing one great act after another, in an almost breathless succession.

Very often, we also think of Jesus and his disciples, as conducting their ministry together, in almost complete isolation from any other people who followed and supported Jesus.

We tend to think in those ways, because that's how our New Testament Gospels are written.

For the most part, our Gospels report only the bold headlines of Jesus' ministry. They concentrate on just the key actors around Jesus. And, for the most part, our Gospels do not report the ordinary, day-to-day details of Jesus' ministry, which inevitably included the need for such things as: lodging, meals, and clothing.

It's only natural that our Gospels would focus on the newsworthy and wondrous aspects of Jesus' ministry. After all, who would read those Gospels, if they were largely an accountant's inventory, of where Jesus and his 12 disciples slept each night, and where they ate their meals together, over the course of three years?

It's quite natural for our Gospels to overlook such details. But consider this. Though the Gospels tend to overlook such details, such details were very important to Jesus' ministry. After all, everybody--including Jesus and his disciples--has to eat and have a place to sleep!

As the old expression goes, "an army travels on its belly." In a sense, that likely was true of Jesus and his disciples. For, in contrast to John the Baptist, the ascetic, who subsisted on mere locusts and honey in the desert, the Gospels suggest that Jesus and his disciples enjoyed a good meal. And, given all their travel by foot across Palestine, it's likely their bodies required hearty meals on a regular basis.

Our Gospels tend to overlook such mundane details. But then, every so often, they do give us a glimpse of such day-to-day needs, and how they were met for Jesus and his disciples.

OUR SCRIPTURE READING this morning, from the *Gospel According to Luke*, tells us, that in addition to his 12 disciples, Jesus also had a group of 70 followers, whom he sent out, two by two, as a kind of advance guard, to all the towns Jesus planned to visit.

As you heard in that scripture reading, Jesus told those 70 followers, that in carrying out their mission, they were to "*carry no purse, no bag, no sandals.*" Instead, upon reaching their destinations, they were to seek out homes, where people would feed them their meals and let them sleep, for free. Those 70 followers were to be completely dependent, on the freely-given, material support of others, for their daily needs.

That was true of those 70 followers. Apparently, that was also the way Jesus and his 12 disciples lived. They were completely dependent on the contributions of others, to continue their ministry.¹

And, who was it, who provided for many of the daily needs of Jesus and his 12 disciples? As Luke's Gospel tells, such help often came from a number of women, who accompanied Jesus and his disciples in their trips across Palestine. In fact, as Luke explicitly says, those women provided for those 13 men, "out of their own resources."

[Luke 8:1-3]

JESUS CONDUCTED an inspiring ministry of healing, preaching, and teaching. But even that wonderful ministry was dependent upon the generous support of others. Think of it!

--Jesus' Palm Sunday entrance, required that someone would be willing to donate a donkey.

--Jesus' Last Supper required that someone would be willing to donate, not only an upper room, but also the makings of a Passover meal. And, somebody had to prepare the parts of that meal which weren't provided by the Temple.

--Even Jesus' miracle of feeding 5,000, came about, after a young boy was willing to contribute his five barley loaves and two fish, so Jesus could use them, to feed others.

Many Christians assume, that Jesus was essentially a magician, who was "above" all practical human needs.

Many Christians may imagine, that:

--If Jesus really needed a donkey for Palm Sunday, he could just conjure one up on the spot--abracadabra!

--Or, if Jesus really needed an upper room, he could just dream one into existence--presto!

It's true that Jesus performed some miracles. But here's the point we should not forget. Apart from certain special miracles, which Jesus performed, as signs for his followers, it wasn't Jesus' way, to use sheer magic, to provide for himself and his disciples.

YOU WILL RECALL Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, which took place at the very beginning of his ministry. In that experience Jesus was tempted to enter a ministry of magic. For example:

- He was tempted to ease his great hunger in the desert, by magically turning stones into bread.
- He was tempted to "wow" the crowds by making a seeming suicide plunge from the Jerusalem Temple, knowing full well that God's angels would magically save him at the last moment.

From the beginning of Jesus' ministry, to his death on the cross, Jesus refused to take the easy, magical way out. Instead, he shared our human flesh and the practical necessities which went with it. In fact, Jesus hungered, he thirsted, he grew tired.

No more than Mary Martin could "fly" without support, Jesus would not fabricate his three-year earthly ministry "out of thin air." In fact, he and his disciples needed the support of others, all along the way.

NOW, LET'S TALK ABOUT TODAY. Unfortunately, many modern Christians seem to view the Christian Church, as I first viewed Peter Pan. Such Christians may respect, and at times, feel deeply inspired by their church's ministry. However, somehow, they imagine that their church's ministry just happens, without any support.

Take a church like ours, for example. Our church has been in existence for 301 years.

- A person comes into our church building and finds that it is attractive and well kept up.
- The building is always heated and lighted.
- The pews are even padded for comfort.
- Every Sunday, without fail, one is handed a brand new church bulletin.
- Every Sunday, the minister and lay reader, magically appear at the sanctuary door at the appointed hour, and the service proceeds.
- As one sits in the downstairs pews, facing forward, the music of the service even seems to emanate, right on schedule, from a heavenly vault overhead.

There is, indeed, a certain "magic" about our church on Sunday mornings-- that weekly hour, which is at the heart of our church's life.

There's a certain "magic" about our Sunday mornings which is inspiring. But here's the thing. It's all too easy for that "magic," to lull one into taking, our church and its ministry, very much for granted.

After all, as some might say: *"Our church has been in existence for 301 years; it likely will be here another 300. So...why should I worry!"*

The real truth of the matter, however, is this. Our church has not endured for 301 years, because of sheer magic. Rather, our church has endured, because for 301 years, our church people have been caring and generous--caring and generous, in giving of themselves and their material resources, so the gospel of Christ, would be proclaimed and lived, in this place.

Make no mistake about it. If this church didn't have many people supporting it in the past, and in the present, it would not survive.

Of course, the gospel of Jesus Christ would survive, but this church and its expression of that gospel would die.

For if many generous, helping hands did not hold this church up, with their time, their talents, and their treasures--if there weren't many generous hands holding this church up--there would be:

- no ministry,
- no worship services,
- no heat, no lights,
- no bulletins, no music, and
- no sanctuary for worship.

In short, without those helping hands, giving of themselves and their resources, there would be no First Congregational Church "magic" on Sunday mornings, or at any other time of the week, for that matter.

THROUGH THE YEARS, I've learned that modern Christians sometimes resent it, when churches talk about their need for money. I've heard such folks say, that they expect Christian churches to be more 'spiritual,' as Jesus was "spiritual."

But here's the reality:

--Jesus and his disciples were never so 'spiritual,' that they didn't have to eat, have clothes on their backs, have shelter for the night [particularly in bad weather], or have financial resources at their disposal with which to help the poor.

--Jesus and his disciples were never so 'spiritual,' that they didn't need, the ongoing, generous support of others, in order to carry on their ministry effectively.

Yes, it's true. Our New Testament Gospels don't highlight such support. But, even so, like the cords that enabled Mary Martin's Peter Pan to "fly," that support, needed to be there--and it was there, for Jesus' ministry!

THIS YEAR OUR CHURCH FAMILY has a special challenge before it. We need

generous, helping hands, and a great many of them. In short, we need everyone's support, to continue the effectiveness of our church's ministry.

What does it cost to operate our church? Here are some projected figures for 2010, to think about.

Next year, on average, it will cost \$1,051 each day, for our church to function. I'm told that is not a significant increase from previous years. Our Trustees have tried to be prudent with expenses, overall. Nonetheless, that's what our church's need is expected to be in 2010.

Think of that, it will cost \$1,051 per day. Now think of your own support of our church in 2010. How many days and/or portions of a day will you be able to support, through your pledge to our church?

Now, some separate categories. We all like to have a warm and comfortable sanctuary and church building in which to worship, enjoy fellowship, or work. Spreading our projected 2010 fuel costs over the entire year, that comes to about \$230 per week. Of course, we don't see that heat. But we would sure notice it if it were absent.

All the use of electricity in our church is expected to cost us about \$10,000 in 2010. And, the cost to insure our building, is expected to be more than \$13,000 in 2010.

I'm sure I don't need to go down the whole list of 2010 projected budget items. If you haven't received one of those spending plans, they are available from our church office.

I don't need to go down through that list. But, I do wish to say this.

As we face the new year, 2010, in our church's ministry, we really do need everyone's support.

We need a great many caring hearts and generous, strong hands, to hold this church up--with their time, talents, and treasures--so the gospel of Jesus Christ, will continue to be proclaimed and lived effectively, in this place.

IN A FEW MINUTES we will go into coffee hour and hear a presentation by our church's Stewardship Committee. There, you will also receive a beautifully crafted booklet which our Stewardship Committee has created. That booklet describes the needs and some of the goals of our church in 2010.

That booklet also gives some examples, of how much our church and its ministry really do mean to our parishioners. I invite you to read through that booklet, prayerfully with an open heart.

And, with that booklet in your hands, I invite you to think about your

own love of our church and your personal commitment to it.
Everyone's support is needed!

ENDNOTE

i. See Luke 9:1-6. One difference from that account, is that John 12:6 indicates that Judas kept a common purse for Jesus and the 12, apparently from contributions they received along the way, to support their ministry.