Sermon: Proper 29A
Title: Sometimes Love Looks Like a Pair of Shoes
Author: Amy Morrow Stalboerger | St. Stephen's, Fargo

Amy preached this sermon on Sunday, November 15, 2026 at St. Stephen's in Fargo. The Scripture for their Stewardship Sunday at St. Stephen's was Matthew 25:35-40.

***

When I was thinking about what to say for Stewardship Sunday, I realized that I could stand up here and talk about church budgets, pledge cards, and the importance of keeping the lights on. And as someone who understands the importance of paying the bills, believe me, those things matter. But this year, I want to talk about something a little different.

I want to talk about what your generosity actually looks like.

And, believe it or not, my story involves a house fire, a trip to Target, and a pair of mismatched house shoes. Not exactly the traditional ingredients for a Sunday sermon. But bear with me.

An Ordinary Monday
On May 11, 2026, I woke up expecting a perfectly ordinary Monday. My husband, Josh, had gone to work. Our two-and-a-half-year-old son, James, was at daycare. I was working from home, on a conference call, going about my day.

And then, around 11 o'clock that morning, everything changed. A fire broke out near our neighbor's home, and before I could fully comprehend what was happening, our home was burning.

There were fire trucks, police officers, neighbors gathering, and an overwhelming sense that life as I knew it had just been turned upside down. I remember standing outside, watching everything unfold, trying to understand what was happening. I had my purse, my phone, my work laptop, and the clothes I was wearing. And, as I would discover later, two house shoes that didn't even match.

Apparently, when your house is on fire, coordinating your footwear isn't particularly high on the priority list.

But here's what I've learned about a crisis. It's not just the big things that overwhelm you. It's the little things:

- Where are we going to sleep tonight?
- What are we going to wear tomorrow?
- What does James need?
- Where do you even begin when you suddenly need to replace the most basic things in your life?

DO NOT COPY

I couldn't answer those questions. I was simply overwhelmed.

And Then, People Started Showing Up.
In those first critical hours, something remarkable happened. People started showing up. Our neighbors opened their home to us. My parents came. My colleagues stepped in to cover my work responsibilities. And somewhere in the middle of all that chaos, my mother called Jean Sando. Now, if you know Jean, you probably won't be surprised by what happened next. Jean got to work. She contacted members of St. Stephen's, began organizing donations, and helped coordinate the immediate assistance our family needed.

There was no elaborate plan. There was no emergency committee meeting. There was simply a family in trouble and a congregation willing to help. And then Jean met me at Target.

The Target Run
Now, I have been to Target hundreds of times. Usually, I go in for three things and come out with twelve. But this trip was different. I was standing in Target just hours after watching my home burn, trying to figure out what we needed to get through the night. And I couldn't think. I mean, I genuinely couldn't think of the things we needed.

Toothbrushes. Pajamas. Clothes. All the things we use every single day without giving them a second thought. My brain simply wasn't working that way. Thankfully, Katie, who was James's nanny, was there. Katie knew what James needed, and she started filling the cart.

Pajamas, essentials, the things that would help make an unfamiliar hotel room a little more comfortable for a two-and-a-half-year-old boy. And then someone noticed my feet. Apparently, I was still wearing those mismatched house shoes. Now, I hadn't given my shoes a second thought. But the people around me had. And they decided that, among all the other things we needed, I should probably have a proper pair of shoes.

So we went and got me shoes. It's such a small detail, isn't it? A pair of shoes. But I've thought about that moment many times since.

Because while I was trying to comprehend the enormity of what we had lost, the people around me were paying attention to the things I couldn't even think about. Katie was making sure James had what he needed. Jean was coordinating help. And St. Stephen's was helping pay for the essentials we were putting into that shopping cart.

Later that evening, Jean's family helped us move everything into our hotel room. And by the time we closed the door that night, we still had no idea what the next day, the next week, or the next year would look like. But James had pajamas. We had toothbrushes. We had a safe place to sleep. And I had two matching shoes. Which, under the circumstances, felt like a pretty significant accomplishment.

DO NOT COPY

What Jesus Was Talking About
In today's Gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus tells us: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

And later, he tells us: "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

I've heard those words many times throughout my life. But I understand them differently now. Because on May 11, I was the person who needed help. I was the person who didn't know what her family was going to need. And I was the person who needed someone else to step in and say, "We've got this. Let us help."

That's exactly what happened. The people of St. Stephen's didn't just offer kind words. They turned their faith into action. And that's what I believe Jesus is asking us to do. Not simply to talk about love. But to practice it. Not simply to pray for people who are struggling. But to recognize when we can become part of the answer to those prayers.

And sometimes that means doing something extraordinary. But sometimes it means doing something wonderfully ordinary. Like filling a shopping cart. Or buying someone a pair of shoes.

What Stewardship Really Means
I think when we hear the word stewardship, it's easy to think about what we're being asked to give.

- How much money can I pledge?
- How much time can I volunteer?
- Can I really afford to do more?

And those are important questions. But I'd like to suggest a different question this morning. What does our giving make possible?

When we contribute to St. Stephen's, we're not just helping pay for a building. We're sustaining a community. A community where people know one another. Where someone notices when you're struggling. Where someone picks up the phone when there's an emergency. Where people have both the willingness and the resources to respond.

The financial support we give to our church helps make its ministry possible. It sustains the people, relationships, and work that allow us to serve one another and our neighbors. And when a crisis happens, those relationships become invaluable. I can tell you that from experience. Because on May 11, I wasn't thinking about the church budget.
I wasn't thinking about how much anyone had pledged. I was thinking about how I was going to take care of my little boy. And the people of this church helped me do that. That's what your generosity made possible.

DO NOT COPY

We Don't Know When We'll Need One Another
There's something else I've learned through this experience. Most of us go through life assuming tomorrow will look a lot like today. We'll wake up, make our coffee, go to work, take care of our families, and do it all again. Until one day, something happens that changes everything. And suddenly, we're the ones who need help.

I never imagined I would be standing in Target, hours after losing my home, relying on other people to help me remember to buy toothpaste. But there I was. And what a gift it was to have people who knew us, cared about us, and were willing to step in. That's one of the beautiful things about being part of a church family.

We don't just come together on Sunday mornings. We become part of one another's lives. We celebrate together. We grieve together. And when life becomes difficult, we help carry one another through it.

Paul tells us in Galatians to "bear one another's burdens." And that is exactly what happened to my family. For a little while, when I couldn't carry everything myself, other people carried some of it for me.

Our Opportunity to Give
So as we consider our stewardship commitments this year, I hope we'll remember that giving isn't just about meeting a financial goal. It's about making sure St. Stephen's can continue to be this kind of community.

- A church that responds.
- A church that welcomes.
- A church that notices.
- A church that puts its faith into action.

And we don't have to wait for something as dramatic as a house fire to do that. There are people around us every day who need kindness, encouragement, companionship, or a helping hand. Sometimes we know what they're going through. Sometimes we don't. But each of us has something to give.

- Maybe it's money.
- Maybe it's time.
- Maybe it's a particular talent.
- Maybe it's simply being the person who notices that someone else needs help.

All of those gifts matter. And when we bring them together, God can do extraordinary things through an ordinary group of people.

DO NOT COPY

A Pair of Shoes

When I think back on May 11, there are so many things I remember. The fire trucks. The smoke. The uncertainty. The feeling of watching our home burn and realizing that our lives were about to change in ways we couldn't yet understand.

But I also remember Jean. I remember Katie filling the shopping cart for James. I remember the generosity of St. Stephen's. I remember Jean's family helping us get settled into our hotel room. And I remember those shoes. Because, in a strange way, those shoes have come to represent something much bigger to me.

They remind me that when I couldn't think clearly, someone else could. When I couldn't figure out what we needed, someone else helped. And when I felt completely overwhelmed, I was surrounded by people who were willing to carry some of that burden. That's what the church did for us. That's what your generosity made possible.

And that's what I hope we will continue to make possible for others. Because we never know when someone might need a meal, a place to stay, a kind word, or simply a pair of shoes. But when that moment comes, I hope we will always be a church that is ready to respond.

Not because we're obligated to. But because we love one another. And because Jesus taught us that when we care for one another, we are caring for Him.

So this Stewardship Sunday, as you consider what you can give, I hope you'll remember that your gift is so much more than a number on a pledge card. It's an act of faith. It's an act of love. And someday, for someone who needs it, it might make all the difference in the world.

Thank you, St. Stephen's, for being there for my family. And thank you for showing me what it truly means to be the hands and feet of Christ. Amen.

DO NOT COPY