I know we are a small congregation, but for those of you who don’t know me – my name is Jantha Jamison and I have been privileged to serve on the budget committee and now as part of our stewardship campaign – some of you may know I am a CPA by profession – and some may know my father was a pastor.

That is not why I am here – I am not here as a CPA or as a PK – and I get uncomfortable speaking in public unless I am reading… So, why am I here? The only way I can really explain that is to tell you a story – and to anyone who may have heard me before, my apologies – please bear with me…

I am the middle of seven children – and while it’s true my father became a pastor later in life, we grew up as children of a college professor and a housewife – my parents had a strong faith which they sought to instill in their children both in words and actions. As a family we attended Sunday School and church every week – even my parents – we always prayed together at mealtimes - Mom tucked us in with books and prayers at bedtime. I took my turns with my mother making and serving meals at the Senior Center, visiting nursing homes, and taking various care packages to neighbors. I went to VBS first as a student, then as a helper – I studied in confirmation class and I chose to be confirmed. The world was beautiful – I was loved – and God was in charge

When I was 14 I came face to face with evil – I fought – and I lost. In that moment my world shattered. I couldn’t understand why God didn’t protect me – I had done everything I was supposed to do – why did He leave me? Why didn’t He love me?? I looked around at my siblings and my friends and I couldn’t understand – Why? Why did He love them and not me?? I began to hate God – the church – and all the lies I had been taught – I couldn’t decide if my parents were simply idiots who had been completely hoodwinked, or if they were just trying to ‘trick’ us into being good – but either way – I knew the lie.

By the time I was in my early 20’s I was states away in Arizona – had two children – and was in a bad marriage. I had gotten really good at disparaging ‘the church’ and all its hypocrisy – I worked hard to be hard – to live in ‘reality’ – yet all the while, there was there was a pull - something that from time to time would lead me into a church - but I would just sit there in the pew – watching ‘God’s people’ going through their empty little rituals – the people that He actually loved - and I would come away with my anger renewed.

We lived in row housing behind a small house – the day we moved in we punched through the pipe in the bathroom sink trying to clear a clog with a hanger – stinky, slimy, brownish water poured out all over the floor – we learned to shake the shower curtain before getting in the shower so the roaches would fall off and not drop on you while you showered – and to step over the rotted hole in floor when getting out so you wouldn’t catch your foot or make the hole bigger by breaking the edges – if you came into the kitchen at night and turned on the light a swarm of roaches would scurry out of the oven and over its – turning its white sides into a moving wave of blackness – and to make matters worse we couldn’t pay our bills and our electricity got shut off – I looked at my life – and my children – I felt unjustifiably cursed and I resented all those people who had it so easy – all those “God” people

We lived without electricity for nearly 3 months – then one afternoon I found a plain unmarked envelope in our mailbox – inside the envelope was the cash we needed to have our electricity turned back on and a note that said ‘to bring light back to your lives’ – for a moment I was over-whelmed – but I couldn’t let go of my pride or my anger – and even though the note wasn’t signed I had good idea where it came from – the couple in the small house in front of our row – self-rightouse do gooders – and I’d be danged if I was going to bow to their pity and take their charity – so, envelope in hand I marched down the alley to their house, getting more and more angry with every step – I got to the door gave it a good hard knocking – the gal opened the door and as civilly as I could I said “thanks, but no thanks – we are fine – we don’t need your money” and shoved the envelope out to her. She said “It’s not ours” and my anger and my voice started rising “Don’t insult me – we may be poor, but I’m not stupid – and we don’t need your money” She stood there fixed and said “it’s not ours – it belongs to God – you’ll have to give it back to Him”

Those words stopped me like a punch in the gut – I froze – my head was swimming – it belongs to God? But – why would He give it to me? …

She opened her door for me and I stepped in – their house was no better than ours – her living room was barely furnished - she had a single old brown couch – a metal dinette chair - a garage sale coffee table – and a little TV sitting on a plastic milk crate – the envelope in my hand held enough cash to pay her rent for a month – and here she was - talking to me about all the gifts in their lives - how they had so much – how they had talked to their pastor when they saw our lights get shut off and had been saving their tithe for us – I don’t remember what else she said but I remember the walk back down the alley, holding the envelope – it was then I realized - God had never abandoned me – He had been there all along - it was I who had turned my back on Him – God used this young couple’s decision to tithe to reach down and rescue me

I wish I could say we became close friends - but we didn’t – I wish I could say I remembered her name - I don’t - But I will never forget her face or her courage or her faith – and that is why I am here – but this is not my story – this is God’s story

Know that through your own years of faithful giving you too have turned on lights – you may not see it, but God always honors His children’s obedience in giving – God uses faithful stewards to fulfill St Francis’s prayer “Lord, where there is darkness let me sow light”.

My prayer for these stewardship weeks is for us to recognize all the gifts we have already been given, to reflect, and to respond.