

Stewardship Talk, 2007

“Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also”

I feel compelled to share with you that I was the one who chose this year’s stewardship theme, a passage from Luke which reads, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Luke 12:34). If you do not love it, do not blame Dana Garrett who wrote our stewardship letter or Duncan who will preach next weekend, or even Jenn Latham who still quietly “runs” much around here, though she is no longer paid to do so. The treasure and heart buck stops here! And I selected this oddly worded, and yet I believe inspiring, passage because when it appeared in a Gospel reading this summer, I found myself dumbfounded. I repeated the words to myself over and over. I liked the idea that where we put our treasure is related to our hearts, but at the same time, I kept stumbling over the confusing sense of cause and effect between that treasure and heart. “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” It seems counter-intuitive. I would expect the reverse. After all, we put our money where our mouth is not our mouth where our money is. But in these words, we hear a “Just do it” sort of message, and we are supposed to accept that our hearts and metaphorical mouths will follow. The thought of preaching such a message for stewardship seems a bit dicey. Should I get up here and tell you to just fork over the cash, as much as you can spare, knowing that it will ultimately transform you for the better? Where your treasure is... after all, I might say. I could, but I somehow have doubts about the return. I know that I picked the theme, but frankly, even I feel a little uncomfortable with some of its implications.

I find that I am not the only one who feels uncomfortable with the concept, at least in terms of asking for money. Episcopal Priest Barbara Crafton writes about her own feelings of fund-raising. She says, “I have... [a] dislike of fund-raising... People who are good at it point out that what we're really doing is giving people an opportunity to be part of something they value. [Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. And so] Don't feel reluctant to ask; you're giving them a gift by asking, a chance to do something important. Right. I do believe that.

But I am scarred. I write fundraising letters and feel sorry for the people to whom I send them, afraid that they'll resent me for asking. That's funny, since I don't resent them for asking. I must restrain myself from penciling in an apology. In the manner of fundraising letters... Sometimes you... scrawl down at the bottom of the letter [something like] -- "Hope you can help!"... You're not supposed to write "Listen, I feel just terrible about this, but they made me send it."

So I imagine that, in Hell, I'll have to be the development director. Little demons with pitchforks will force me to send out billions of letters to our donor base, which by then will be very large: "If by some chance you did find a way to take it with you, won't you consider making a gift to make it possible for your loved ones to go to Hell, too?" I'll invite people to the annual Disco Madness Gala, which will feature only one song, "Turn the Beat Around," over and over and over. "Hope you can come and dance, dance dance!" I'll scribble at the bottom of the letters... We'll have a fundraising drive on the radio every other week, and we will pre-empt the season finale of "West Wing" for our Gingivitis Telethon.” She concludes, “This could happen. We do not know what lies beyond this life. Better be very, very good from now on.”

“Where your treasure is, there will your heart will be also.” No matter my and perhaps your dislike of fund-raising and the difficulty of broaching the most taboo, testy, and difficult subject of money, that is what I want to do today. And I want to do so in the context of stewardship, which is more than fund-raising. Stewardship is about, as Bishop Don said last week, living a life of gratitude and rejoicing that everything in life is a gift from God. And in talking about stewardship and money, I want to bear in mind our challenging theme of “Where your treasure is, there will your heart will be also” because ultimately, I believe stewardship, fund-raising, treasures and hearts are all interconnected.

To begin to address stewardship, fund-raising, treasure, and hearts, I want to first talk about treasure. And I want to define treasure in the loosest of terms. I want to say that treasure is everything that we consider valuable: our money, our time, our relationships, our natural resources, our families, and our vocations (or at least the money we are paid from such positions). Treasure is all that is good and needed in our lives. And if we bear in mind the parable of the talents, the parable in which several servants were told to invest on behalf of their master, we are called to nurture and invest our treasures on God’s behalf, so that they might grow and bear fruit. Of course, as in the parable of the talents, everyone is not given the same resources. We all have different treasures and challenges, and we have all probably made a mix of good and, well, challenging decisions with those treasures. But whether our treasure is large or small, we are invited to live a life of thanksgiving and stewardship, caring for and investing in our world, our families, our church, and all who are in need, not simply hiding what we have away. In terms of money and treasure, and I would love to be able to apply this to relationships, the church has always upheld the biblical concept of sharing a percentage of your income, something off of the top to our church, to other charities, and with people in need, even other family members. For those of us who are accepting that challenge, but are unable to jump in at the recommended 10 percent, which is what a tithe is, I hold up my personal model, again, which was to start out at some percent, in my case it was 3, and keep adding to that percentage each year. However, even if you cannot share a tithe or a proportional gift, hopefully, you can still share part of who and what you are in this place and in the world. Ultimately, I have to believe that what Jesus is saying is correct. We have to make a leap of faith with our treasure, in every sense of the word treasure, even if we have to start with small, manageable baby jumps. We are called and invited to live a life of thankfulness and giving. And we have to trust that it will transform our hearts and lives.

And so to our hearts and where they will be. As some of you have heard me say, I often declare that much of my soul resides on my Grandparent’s farm in Cheyenne Valley, Oklahoma. It is the place where I grew up with beef cattle and wheat and spent my summers. And the center of that small, rural farming community is a Methodist Church. And Cheyenne Valley Methodist Church is the small red brick building where the denizens of Cheyenne Valley learned to care for one another. It is the place where Edna May Marlatt organized Vacation Bible School along with Darlene Inman who led us with extensive crafts, far beyond popsicle stick 101. And when a minister accidentally left the boiler on and the church burned down, it was the place that was rebuilt by everyone in the community. The church has been home to many a supper with fried chicken and four layer cake, and when my Grandfather died two months after my ordination, I led the funeral there.

When my sister visited me here a year ago, her first impression was that she felt reminded of Cheyenne Valley Methodist Church, how warm people are, how intimate it all feels. And I would say that we are very similar to them there. We also come together in a way that makes us bigger than we are on our own. We center ourselves on love, faith, and hospitality. And we rely on our members to make this place work. From serving 70 people at the Croton Caring Committee last weekend, to running in the Harry Chapin fun run this weekend, to organizing our work at the Peekskill Soup Kitchen, we are a community that gives. And it goes on. From people who have planned extensively for our Sunday School, to Laura Ravotti who conducts and plays here each week, to the choir, to our Eucharistic Ministers, to our lay readers, to our ushers and altar Guild, to those who schedule all of them, to Kim and Jenn before her in the office, and Holly Anzani who is here almost every day as Treasurer, to our babysitters, to Mark Anzani who worked tirelessly on our computers this week when one failed and Laura Seitz who coordinates our grounds, to Louise Levey who is helping us attempt to solve our continual problems with rodents in our roof and has applied for grants to help stretch our budget. To those who sell shopping certificates and those who organize and help at June Fest to fund our church and our outreach. To our outreach committee which helps keep us focused on living a life of sharing. To our Senior and Junior warden who help keep me sane and coordinate everything from stewardship to responses in difficult situations. To the members of our discernment committee who are helping us prepare for who we are and who we are becoming, to everyone who comes and participates in our life of faith. We are a community that thrives only because so many have chosen to invest their treasure: their time, their efforts, and yes, their money in this place.

And our hearts, as a result, are here. “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” For me, and I hope for you, my heart has gone to where my treasure of time, talent, family, money and even my vocation is, right here. And on November 11th, after the 10 am service, I hope that you join with me in celebrating our heart and our community, and our treasures at our annual Stewardship Brunch. And, I invite you to contemplate, pray, reflect, and think about how we each put our treasures here so that we and those around us might see the love of God through our community at St. A’s.