

Stewardship Sermon

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This Saturday/Sunday marks the beginning of a wonderful season, the most wonderful time of the year. No, do not be misled by the candy at CVS. I am not spookily speaking of All Hallow's Eve. And I am not quite ready for a cornucopia of puritanical pilgrims either. Furthermore, I am also not rushing the Department Stores for the Holidays and their generic elevator music. I am speaking about the lovely, the fantastic, phenomenal, fantabulous season of Stewardship. Perhaps I lied or at least misrepresented. Most do not seem to think that stewardship is the most wonderful time of the year, but I do, not just because you could help support the life and work of this church, or even my salary. That part, in all reality, makes me more nervous than happy (hear my nervous, conflict of interest laugh). Actually, why this season is wonderful is that ideally it is an answer to an existential crisis that I guarantee each and every one of us are going through, will go through, or have gone through in our lives: namely, how do we make meaning of this life, and how do we respond to what we have in this world?

You might not have thought that a stewardship campaign could answer such lofty questions, but as a Christian, I have to believe that the answer to those questions and even our salvation rests in the giving of ourselves: sharing our time and talents for the betterment of humanity. God gives us the world, and Jesus teaches us how to live there. From his life and death, we see how a forgiving, non-violent man transforms a community and us by giving of himself. And we are likewise invited to go into the world and share what we have to carry on the work of Jesus. And whether we like it or not, part of that sharing rests in our pocketbooks. Although I hope stewardship is a topic that we address year round, because it is about every act of our faith not only our financial support, this is the time of year when we talk about stewardship in terms of money. That does not mean that we will be implementing well-planned money pitches in the Public Broadcasting vein of, "This sermon has been made possible by generous contributions from viewers like you!" Though it has, I am more interested in a spiritual approach to money and how money relates to our faith.

But perhaps, some of us will not see this opportunity as marvelous. Some of you might have some nervous laughter of your own. After all, money as a subject is often more taboo than sex, and asking for money seems worse. And I also understand that we are still new in our relationships together. I am in month four. Perhaps you wonder if I could be a shameless shamer, telling you that what you give will never be enough, or perhaps you ponder if I could be a hostage taker haughtily demanding, "Give me all your money or the kid down front gets it." But I assure you, there is no shame or humiliation intended. What I hope to offer is an invitation. It is an invitation to be vulnerable, to share part of what we have, even who we are, with all of us as a response to God's love. And I sincerely believe that such an approach to life is its very meaning.

Stewardship has to start with the belief that everything we have comes from God. Our hands, our arms, our eyes to see, our brains to imagine.... All of these come from God. And if those are God's, so is everything that we produce and receive. Our work is God's; our relationships are God's; and even our money is God's. Everything is God's. This is the most important point of

stewardship, primarily because it is the most misunderstood. In our society founded on individualism, we are quick to label our possessions, bodies, and relationships as “MINE.” In part, they are, and in part, they are not. We are also stewards of all our faculties, and our complex communities of cells that we call bodies, until we give them back to the earth. And stewardship invites us to ask the question: what can I do with my God-given gifts and the time I have? How can I be a good steward of my bounty? Of course, we need to protect ourselves, feed ourselves, provide for our children, but we also need to ask the question of how to respond to what we have been given. And stewardship is that invitation to put the context of God around how we use our time, how we work, how we study, how we play, and how we spend our money.

In today’s Gospel reading from Mark (10:35-45), we hear the story of James and John arguing over who will get to sit at the right and left hand of Jesus in heaven. They have fancied themselves followers and disciples of Jesus, but instead they seek power, fame, and influence. And Jesus responds, “But whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve...” James and John have interpreted Jesus in their common understandings about power and human relationships. But for Jesus and our God, salvation and the answers to those existential questions are in giving, which I believe can only truly come when we realize that God is the source of all that is and all that will be.

That is why we invite ourselves to have an attitude of giving. But the question of how also arises in stewardship. For most of us, spending does not contain much flexibility, and the “how” is the crux. We might have a tight budget. We might be broke. But being almost or close to broke financially is different than being broke spiritually. And if you are not broke spiritually, I guarantee that we can find some way to give back, even if it is not with much money. Because if we are not broke spiritually, we can realize how in some sense, we are all quite wealthy, even if we are strapped for cash. We have warmth, electricity, many things better than the rest of the world. And we can all afford to share a share of what we have, even if it is what little we have. It is important because just as what we do with our time defines who we are and what we value, how we spend our money also defines what we are and what we value.

The church has traditionally provided a model of giving. Many of you know it is called tithing, giving ten percent of all that we receive. Everybody breathe. This is an invitation, not a requirement. The idea of tithing is taken from models of offering our first fruits, the best of what we have, to God. Now, when we get to specifics of the ten percent, there are questions: some have said that this is post-tax money. Others have said pre-tax. I will leave that one to you. But most churches, I believe, aim at ten percent of total giving, meaning that the total to this church and other organizations equals that percentage of your income. But ultimately, I know that we have to make our own decisions. I can say that, from my own experience, ten percent is extremely difficult. I certainly understand if you share in that experience. Sometimes it is too difficult, and I want to be honest. I am not there yet personally. But every year, starting at 3 percent when I graduated from seminary, I have added a percentage point, and I work toward 10. I say that not to fault or shame anyone who is not there, but to share that this is a journey that we are all on, a journey that I hope you will join. No matter what percentage you find you can share, this is an important goal, giving a percentage. Giving a percentage, proportional giving is a way that we can see in our budgets how we much we really want to invest in giving. And for

me, every year when I accomplish my goal, I feel like I am more myself, like the inside of me matches the outside. In the end, I hope that we can all take part in this year's stewardship campaign, whether you can give 10 percent or .007 percent. Because no matter what we can give, this is wonderful invitation to respond to what God has given to us. And us, working together, working as the Body of Christ to reach out to those around us, can do more if everyone participates. And I hope you will take that seriously when you receive a pledge card in the mail in a few weeks.

In the meantime, I want to continue to kick off this most wonderful time of the year as we think about how to respond to God's love. I am going to ask the ushers help me pass out index cards. And no, it is not a pre-pledge card. Not yet, folks. Today, I invite you to write down your answers to two questions. This first is: what are you thankful for in this life? I ask you to seriously contemplate our blessings. What God has given you? And then, as a second item, I ask you to write how you respond to that thankfulness with your life. Do you coach soccer, help out around here, give money? And when you have written something on the cards, I invite you to put them in the offering plate or in the basket at the rear of the church. We will be writing answers for the next two weeks, and on the Sunday that we will ask that you make your commitment by pledging, on Sunday, November 12th, our thanksgivings will adorn the Parish Hall for our annual stewardship brunch after the 10 AM service. As you might have guessed, our stewardship season this year will have two themes: 1) to talk about proportional giving: a percentage of what we have been given. And we will talk about Thankfulness, we are asking each of us to think about what we have and what we do with it. As I have said, this is an invitation. But it is an invitation to something phenomenal and fabulous, and it can be part of the answer the larger questions of life. No guilt. Just invitation.