

Stewardship 2018 “Treasure” Sermon

October 7, 2018

Next Sunday is our Annual Stewardship Sunday, when we pledge our time, talent, and treasure to God’s work through Christ Church, and we celebrate our life together as a parish family with a potluck luncheon.

At our SWEEPS Council Meeting last Sunday, we decided to use the sermon time on Stewardship Sunday for the leaders of our various ministries to share very briefly about their particular ministry, so that those who **don’t** know much about a certain ministry might understand it better and might feel called to give of their Time and Talent in that particular ministry.

Which means that today is the only time I will have this Stewardship Season to fulfill my responsibility as specified in the Canons of the Episcopal Church, which state: “It shall be the duty of Rectors... to ensure that all persons in their charge are instructed concerning Christian stewardship, including: ... generous and consistent offering of time, talent, and treasure for the mission and ministry of the Church at home and abroad; [and] the biblical standard of the tithes [or “tenth”] for financial stewardship...” [“Christian Stewardship,” Canon III.9.6(b)(2)] So rather than preach a sermon today, I will share some thoughts on stewardship of our money, raise some questions, and encourage you to consider the role Christ Church plays in your life.

Now, I believe that there are two general perspectives on giving money to the church. We might call these: A) the “What is my money buying?” perspective, and B) the “I need to give for my spirit’s sake” perspective. Both are important for good stewardship.

The first perspective is the one we naturally gravitate toward, since we live within a capitalist economy and a culture based on *quid pro quo*: We give money in return for goods and services – for automobiles, groceries, the expert advice of lawyers and doctors, etc. Some church stewardship “experts” encourage rectors and Vestries and stewardship committees to communicate to parishioners what it is that they are *getting* in **return** for their financial gifts to the church. But that’s not always easy to describe or quantify, since giving money to a Church doesn’t always give you something visible or tangible in return.

We all know that it costs money to heat and cool our buildings, keep up our beautiful grounds, print the bulletins you hold in your hands. The computers and technology in our office sometimes break down (as happened this past week), necessitating repairs and replacement. There are telephone and internet costs, property and liability insurance costs – and many other costs of running a church which most of us don’t even think about – unless you serve on our Finance Committee or Vestry.

Of course, the biggest single item in our budget is my salary and benefits. And there, the question is: What do you get in return for having a fulltime priest? What do you get in return for the 10 to 20 hours it takes me each week to write a sermon, in which I attempt to connect the teachings of Jesus and the Bible to our own lives and our own world? the 3 to 5 hours it takes me to choose hymns and put together Prayers of the People each week? the 2 to 4 hours it takes to put together the weekly Belltower newsletter? What do you get in return for my daily hour-and-a-half of prayer and spiritual practice, and my monthly trip to Colorado Springs to see my Spiritual Director?

When I was ordained in 1979, there were no personal computers, no internet, no web sites, no email. Now, a good part of my communications – including pastoral counseling – occurs by email. What do you get in return for the one or two hours it takes me each day to read and respond to emails? to keep up our church Facebook page and Web site? to be faithful to my own spiritual and intellectual formation by reading Christian journals, books, blogs, and news sites, and listening to faith-related audio books at the gym or while in the car?

What do you get in return for my faithfulness to Jesus' call to care for the poor and outcast by listening to those who come to our door during the week seeking help and comfort, or my supporting Laundry Love, or our Homeless Coalition?

What do you get in return for having a pastor on call 24/7, for having a priest to lead funerals, weekly Eucharists, baptisms, and weddings?

What do you get in return for having perhaps the only Christian pastor in town who actively supports contemplative prayer and a contemplative, non-dual approach to the Bible and to life?

My friends, I can't answer these questions about what **you** get in return for my time and efforts; for much of it is subjective and intangible. But I encourage you to ask yourself those questions! For, to be honest, the fact is that it is becoming harder and harder for churches of *any* denomination to afford a fulltime pastor. Half of the Episcopal Churches in the United States cannot afford fulltime priests, and I would guess that there are even more who cannot afford a parish administrator. Now, we are not there yet! But we are not *immune* to this trend, either. Christ Church *can* survive without a fulltime priest and without a parish administrator; but things would be definitely different. You might have to share a priest with some other church in our region. Church members would have to take on some of the tasks that are now performed by Becky or me. And that might be a good thing!

I also would like you to be aware of the fact that we receive a not-insignificant amount of our monetary contributions from people whom you never see – or rarely see – in these pews. The single greatest contributor to our Operating Fund over the past 12 months is not a member of this church, not an Episcopalian, does

not live in Fremont County, and receives no goods or services in return for what he gives. We cannot be certain that his giving will continue, since it comes to us as – to use Becky’s words – “pennies from heaven,” though “pennies” is the wrong denomination to describe his giving. If that income stopped tomorrow, we would be hurting financially.

But if our biggest contributor gets nothing in return for what he gives, why does he give? In order to answer that, we need to look at the *second* perspective on giving money to the church: “I give because I need to give, for my spirit’s sake.” Most of my stewardship sermons in the past have been preached from that perspective. You and I are created in the image of an infinitely generous and giving God, and so it follows that if we are living out of that image of God in which we were created, if we are being our true selves, then we, too, by our very nature, are generous, and *need* to give, for our spirit’s sake.

From the time that Abram gave God a tenth of all he had (Genesis 14:18–20), the “tithe” or tenth has served as a standard of giving required by Orthodox Jews and by many Christian denominations. The General Convention of the Episcopal Church has affirmed many times that “the Biblical tithe is the minimum standard of giving” for Episcopalians. The same is true for the United Methodist Church, Mennonite Churches, the Catholic Church, Seventh Day Adventists, Baptist Churches, Pentecostal Churches, the Mormon Church, and many others.

Now, you have not heard me preach on tithing (giving a tenth of one’s income) as a standard, since I believe it is much easier for some folk to give a tenth of their income than it is for others. Someone who earns a million dollars a year can far more easily afford to give a tenth of that income to the church or other charities than a single mother of 3 who works for minimum wage (though statistics have consistently shown that in practice, those of lower income give a higher percentage of their earnings than do those of higher income). Now, I am single, I have no children to support, and so yes, I am capable of tithing – and I do; and I know that some of you do, also.

But I also know that there are some who *cannot* and (in my opinion) *should not* tithe, because of their life situation. And so, instead of prescribing a tithe (giving a tenth) for everyone, I (and many other Christian ministers) speak, instead, of *proportionate* giving, and challenge folk to honestly and prayerfully take a step up in proportionate giving. If you currently give 1% of your income to the church or other charities, consider taking a step up and give 1½% or 2%. That’s why I have typically printed stairsteps and have challenged us all to take a step up, if we can.

Of course, the word “steward” means someone who is put in charge of what someone *else* owns – like Joseph in today’s Old Testament was put in charge of all that his master owned. As we offer our gifts of money at the altar, we sometimes say, “All things come from Thee, O Lord; and of thine own have we

given thee.” It’s not **our** money to begin with – nor are our lives our own. With our last breath, we return our life to God. And so, in our sequence hymn, we asked God to “Take my life... Take my moments and my days... Take my hands... Take my heart... Take my silver and my gold... Take my love... Take my will... Take myself.” We gain our true self as we give it to God. “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it,” Jesus said (more than once!).

And so I ask of you this week to intentionally and prayerfully consider your stewardship of the money with which God has entrusted you. Don’t fill out your commitment form today, or tomorrow; take several days to consider and pray about what you will pledge to God’s work through Christ Church in the coming year. Consider first what this church means to you, what you get in return for your giving, what would change if Christ Church were not a part of your life, or if you didn’t have a fulltime priest? Then ask yourself, “How does my generous giving make me more like my generous and giving God – in whose image I was created? How does my generous giving help return me to my True Self?”

And then, only then, fill out your Commitment form, bring it to Eucharist with you next week, and place it in the alms basin as a gift to God of yourself.

AMEN