

Our Response to God's Blessings

October 8, 2006

I.

Today I am torn between two choices. On one hand, in keeping with the schedule that we set with the Stewardship Committee, this is the day I preach a sermon about stewardship. And stewardship is a very important spiritual practice in our lives and in the life of the church.

On the other hand, we just heard a Gospel lesson about the sanctity of marriage, and Jesus' views on divorce. This also is an important part of Mark's Gospel, and I don't want to completely pass it over just because of our stewardship program.

So I'm going to say a few words about the Gospel and summarize some thoughts about it, and then spend the rest of the time on stewardship.

II.

Marriage and the family is at the core of many biblical teachings. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus compared the kingdom of heaven to a marriage feast. And our Book of Common Prayer proclaims that the bond and covenant of marriage was established by God in creation.

There is no doubt that God's will is that marriage be for life. But sometimes it doesn't happen. We are human, and we can fall short. There are times when the ending of a marriage might be the only way for both parties to go forward in healing and hope.

But it should not be lightly undertaken. If the marriage ends we are called to repentance even if we don't think we were at fault, in worldly terms. And we are called to seek God's forgiveness even if we don't believe we need it, in worldly terms.

That's because marriage vows are more than worldly promises. They also are inscribed in the books of heaven. And unlike the world, God does not see married couples as two people but one flesh. If we fail to live into the vows that created that one flesh, we must give our failure to God. If we sincerely do so, and "sincerely" is the key word, we can turn around and be washed clean by Christ's love.

And I do not offer that as a license for divorce. The Holy Spirit searches your heart and God will know the truth. He will know if a divorce is merely a matter of convenience or preference, or if there really are insurmountable hurdles.

Now, I want to move from marriage vows to baptismal vows. Just as marriage creates one flesh, so also we are called by baptism to be part of the Body of Christ, which is the Church. And just as God wants us to succeed in marriage, he also calls us to stewardship within the Body of Christ.

III.

In considering how some people look at stewardship, I recall the story about two men who were shipwrecked on a desert island. The first man said "I'm going to walk around the island and look for food and water." He came back after a while without having found anything at all to eat or drink.

Now the second man attended a big church, not an Episcopal church, but one where money was really important. And he said, "I'm not worried, I make five hundred thousand dollars a year. The first man got upset and asked "What good is your money now, we're going to die on

this island.” The second man said again, “I’m not worried, I make five hundred thousand dollars a year, and I tithe to the church. My pastor will find us.”

Well, that is not how we understand stewardship. In popular culture there can be a tendency to look at financial support of the church in the same way as we look at paying dues to a secular organization—a country club, or a professional society, or a homeowners’ association.

In those cases we pay something and we get something. There is a transaction. A deal. A *quid pro quo*. We cannot use the facilities or belong unless we pay.

In the same way, there can be a tendency to think that our support of the church only is intended to meet operational requirements. We have to keep the lights on, the doors open, and the air conditioners repaired. That’s why we give to the church. We need to maintain the building so we can use it. Well, that’s true in a sense, but there is more to it.

Both perspectives, in my view, miss the point of stewardship. Stewardship of God’s creation is entirely different. There is no monetary price of admission. You don’t have to pay to pray. Anyone can walk into this church off the street and worship right beside someone who has been here since the church was founded.

And stewardship pervades our entire lives. It is not something that only happens in the fall when the church addresses the financial side of stewardship. It also is a year around practice that extends to how we use our time and talent. It involves a prayerful commitment of our total life resources that expresses our relationship with God.

If we accept the standard definition of a steward as someone who takes care of things that belong to someone else, and if we also accept the reality that all we have, including our very lives, are gifts from God, then we are caretakers—stewards—of these gifts. And faithful stewardship means returning a portion of these gifts to God in thanksgiving for what he has done for us.

This can be a difficult concept to accept. We live in America. And our society tells us that it’s a free country, and we can own things and do with them as we wish so long as we don’t break any laws. The Bible, however, tells us that everything belongs to God, and we are the managers, the stewards, of that which God has entrusted to us.

The distinction is that in God’s eyes he has given us our resources, but in our eyes we have earned them. We tend to take credit for our success. And that’s fine when we are talking to each other. In a worldly context, we can take credit for ourselves. But in a godly context we must give credit to God.

Here could be a typical worldly perspective. Someone could say, “I got up at 5:00 a.m. all these years. I regularly worked late. I came up with the new design, the bright idea, the new process that made it all possible. I don’t want to sound ungrateful, and I don’t want to diminish God, but I was successful because I worked hard. When you say that all I have is just on loan from God, that seems to diminish my own efforts.” And the same thing could be said about mothers who worked in the home, or people who spent their lives volunteering for worthy causes. They worked hard too.

Well, I would say that you were able to get up at 5:00 a.m. because you had the gift of health and energy. God gave you that. You came up with the bright idea, or new invention or process, because you had the gift of creativity. God gave you that. You succeeded because you had the gift of drive and ambition. God gave you that. And from time to time the ball bounced your way. You had a break or two. Those also were blessings that God gave to you.

In fact, our very existence and our lives are gifts. We are here because God put us on earth and gave us the wherewithal to make something of ourselves. And we have done that. A recent study showed that middle class Americans are better off than ninety seven percent of the people in the rest of the world. Faithful stewardship suggests that we return a proportion of those gifts to God.

Stewardship therefore is a personal spiritual discipline and not merely a budgetary decision for the church. In a way, stewardship is part of you and your life of faith that just happens to affect the church. A wise old priest once said that it is more important that people give than the church receive. Financial stewardship is more of a Christian way of life and less of an accounting decision we make once a year.

You probably have heard Scripture quoted time and time again in stewardship sermons. And there is a great deal of scripture to quote. I would like to offer just two examples, one from the Old Testament and one from the New.

Deuteronomy 8:17-18 cautions "do not say to yourself, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth." But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth." And Matthew 6:19-21 states, "do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

I suspect that you would agree that Matthew is pretty close to the mark. You can determine someone's priorities by looking at their checkbook. People spend money on the things that are important to them, and the things that are important usually find their way into the budget.

Stewardship calls us to make God important. It calls us to give to God first rather than fitting him in after everything else is paid. I heard a preacher once say "Give to God what is right, not what is left." And in considering what is right, I want to briefly discuss the concept of the tithe, and proportional giving.

IV.

In the Episcopal Church the biblical tithe is the standard to which we aspire, if we are able, and which we exceed, if we are able. For some people, ten percent is just not possible, while for others is well within reach.

And I realize that even talking about tithing can produce a lot of different reactions. For some of us, the idea of tithing makes us laugh. "How could we ever do that, it's just not possible, we might say." For others, the suggestion that we tithe could be irritating. "How could you ask me to do something like that" could be the reaction. Other people might feel sorrow or embarrassment at the suggestion. They might say "I would like to tithe, but I just don't see how I can." And still others might have an open mind. "Explain to me how I can do this" they might say.

Well, there is an answer, and it is the idea of voluntary proportional giving. That's the standard that the Diocese of Mississippi uses for parish support of the diocese, and it's the standard that is recommended for member support of the parish.

In short, the idea is to prayerfully consider your circumstances, seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and decide upon a percentage of your income that can be devoted to stewardship. It might be ten percent, or more than ten percent, or less than ten percent. That is between you and God. And if it is less than ten percent, then raising the percentage could be a goal to work toward in coming years. But whatever it is, if prayerfully considered, will be pleasing to God and will honor him.

V.

Here at St. Thomas we are working to expand our work in mission and ministry, and to reach out to the community. The results of your stewardship, not just in the fall but year around, and not just in money but in your time and talent, help us to fulfill our mission.

It helps us to worship and glorify God, and to deepen our own spiritual lives. It enables us to help the needy, and those who are hurting, and who exist on the margins of life. It helps us to learn about the truth of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ. And it helps us to invite others, especially young people, to share with us in what we do, and to help them in the world.

Susan and I will be tithing to the church. Members of the Vestry and Stewardship Committee are committed to voluntary proportional giving, some tithing and others leading to a tithe as is might become possible. We hope you all will prayerfully join with us as the stewardship program goes forward and comes to a conclusion on Stewardship Sunday, November 12.

VI.

Sometimes the phrase "thank you" is used at the end of something. We say "thank you" when we leave someone's home, or after someone does something nice for us. We say "thank you" when bringing closure, or in wrapping things up, or as polite last words before moving on.

That is not the case, however, as we live the spiritual discipline of stewardship. When we return a portion of God's blessings to him, we are saying "thank you." But instead of the end it is the beginning, or the continuation of the beginning. Yes, we express gratitude to God for the things he already has done, but our gifts also look to the future. They look to the future because they strengthen our faith, they draw us closer to God, and they allow us to receive by giving. And in this way we live the lives that God wants us to live.

We soon will recite the Prayers of the People. In Rite I we ask that "we may be faithful stewards of thy bounty." In Rite II we express our thanksgiving "for all the blessings of this life." In both cases we recognize the source of our blessings, and I pray that we all may be led to a faithful expression of thanksgiving for those blessings through our stewardship. *Amen.*