

Our Response To God's Blessings

Commentary on Stewardship

October 2, 2011

I.

In two weeks we will work on both the inside and outside of the church. It will be our annual "fall clean-up." We try to care for and maintain what we have here at St. Thomas.

Today I want to speak about what we have at St. Thomas in a different sense. This is the day our stewardship schedule calls for me to preach a sermon about stewardship rather than talk about the readings. Perhaps some of you might think stewardship is another type of fall clean-up.

And I would say right at the beginning, for those here for the first time today, please don't get the wrong idea. We don't always talk about money. But sometimes it's appropriate because giving to God is an important spiritual practice in our lives, and in the life of the church.

Indeed, stewardship is a way we honor and give thanks to God, and our stewardship campaign begins every year with a sermon that reviews these basic principles of our Christian faith.

I said when the service began that your service bulletins contain a short questionnaire to be used by our St. Thomas Roundtable as it plans for the church's future. It is a survey in which you can express yourself about the church. We hope for a one hundred percent response.

And in a little more than a month from now we will receive pledge cards that also are a type of survey. We will have an opportunity to express ourselves to God about the blessings he has given us. I pray also that we give him a one hundred percent response.

That's because the Stewardship Committee's goal is that every member of the church pledge for 2012. Our guidance is the biblical tithe of ten percent. And recognizing that when a full tithe is not possible, the committee asks that we prayerfully decide on a percentage of income that can be devoted to stewardship. I will say more about this in a few moments.

II.

Preachers sometimes tell jokes about stewardship. Stewardship can be a touchy subject. Some people would rather not be asked about giving to the church. They are uncomfortable about it. And so when we preach we might think a funny story or two will lighten the atmosphere so that we don't seem unduly serious.

But we are priests and pastors. And we would not be faithful to our calling if we did not talk about the priority of money in our lives. I can recall occasions when my father said, "This will hurt me more than it hurts you." Stewardship sermons sometimes are in that category.

But I also would say that if we read the Bible and believe God had something to do with the blessings of our lives, then we need not feel hesitant about our pledges. Stewardship is an opportunity, not a burden. Certainly God is pleased when we do his will in the world. But he is especially pleased when we honor him by what we do in the church as we offer our gifts.

And I would like to follow-up on this thought in two ways. First, I will quickly review some things I have said in the past about the meaning of stewardship as a biblical doctrine. They are worth repeating, even briefly. They suggest what this biblical doctrine means for us

And second, I will offer some thoughts about how we might make our stewardship decisions. Hopefully those decisions are based on prayer about what is proper rather than a process of elimination about what we think we can afford. We give God what is right, not what is left.

And before going further I want to pause to emphasize that I'm not up here trying to lecture or instruct anyone. And I am not the savior of this church; you already have one and his name is Jesus. I, like you all, am merely human, and I know I don't have all the answers.

But I do know that you all have a variety of different circumstances that affect your stewardship decisions, and I know those circumstances can change. And at the end of the day, we all are in this together. We are walking together on a journey that we want to be personally meaningful, to be in the best interests of St. Thomas, and last but not least, to be pleasing to God.

III.

Let's start with the fact that stewardship is not like paying dues, and is not just a budget decision for ourselves or the church. Stewardship is a holy and spiritual discipline that expresses to God, in a tangible way, how we regard him. God knows whether we give off the top, or the bottom. He knows if we give to him first, or only after everyone else gets theirs.

Just before communion every Sunday, after the ushers have brought the offertory to the altar, I raise the alms basins and quote a verse from Scripture. It will happen in a few minutes. We use the King James version for this part, and I say, "All things come of thee O Lord," and you all respond, "And of thine own have we given thee." Of thine own have we given thee.

This confirms that everything we give to the church belongs to God anyway. In the context of the world we, of course, own our things. The law encourages and protects ownership. But God's perspective is different. We cannot assert ownership claims to him. We can't say, "Sorry God, this is mine." We are just using what he in his grace gives us to use.

This might be a difficult idea for some of us to accept. After all, many of us are working hard, saving our money, and making good decisions. And many others did so before retirement. This might lead us to think we can take all the credit for our accomplishments.

But let me suggest that our very lives were given to us by God. And from the moment we were born our lives unfolded as we availed ourselves of the gifts, skills, and abilities that our creator imparted to us.

And certainly we work hard. And perhaps in conversations with each other we can take some credit for that; recognizing, of course, that the sin of pride lurks right over the horizon.

But we also recognize that God gave us the energy and ambition to do all that work. And if we made good decisions that led to success it was because God gave us the judgment and discretion to make those decisions. These all are gifts from God.

And from time to time perhaps the ball bounced our way. We had a break or two. Those also were blessings God gave us. God helped us along the way even though it might not be readily apparent. We are called to accept that success is a blessing from God even though our own efforts also played a part.

The old Frank Sinatra song says, "I did it my way." And while we might say that as we swap stories with each other, we cannot say it to God. God already knows that all the good we ever have done or might do flows from the blessings he has given us.

The Book of Deuteronomy cautions us with these words. "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" (8:17-18). Scripture calls us to know that God has blessed us all, and through our stewardship we return a portion of those blessings to him.

IV.

So, how do we decide how much that portion is? I truly believe that we begin with prayer. "Help me, Lord, to do what is right here." The Lord will bless and honor a prayerful decision.

And the biblical standard is ten percent. It began with Abraham in the Book of Genesis (14:20), it continued in the law God gave Moses on Mt Sinai (Lev. 27:32), it was recognized in the Gospels (Lk. 18:12), and remembered again in the Book of Hebrews (7:4). In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and from the beginning we have been called to give a tenth.

But sometimes God cuts us some slack when we are overburdened. That also is a blessing. As a result, the contemporary church regards a tithe of ten percent as a goal to be worked toward if ten percent truly is beyond our reach. In those situations we have the opportunity to prayerfully determine a lesser percentage that can be devoted to stewardship.

And I would make an important point as we pray about and decide our pledges. If we find ourselves arguing with ourselves, or trying to rationalize or justify what we think we are about to do, we probably should go back and pray again. We usually can find some way to convince ourselves of almost anything. But God knows what truly is in our hearts, and that is what counts.

Now, before I conclude, there is another matter. As you recall, we have had a series of small group stewardship socials the last two years to break bread and discuss stewardship. We will do something different this year, but those gatherings highlighted a question that I, as a priest in the church, feel compelled to address. The question also has come up in other settings.

There seems to be uncertainty about whether giving to charity is the same thing as giving to the church. It is not the same thing. The Bible speaks of giving to God. And the Bible also calls us to help the needy. But the latter is not an alternative to the former. We give God the full share no matter what else we might do.

We all probably know atheists and nonbelievers in the world who are good people by secular standards, and they give to charity. What do they think they are doing? There is no way they think they are giving to God, and this is one time they are right. They wouldn't do it otherwise.

So, while charities might do good works, they are not the church. And many of those charities have restrictions against using funds for religious purposes. Giving to charity, commendable though it is, is not a substitute for giving to God and does not count as giving to the church.

Our Christian duty is to tithe or do the best we can for the church, first. Then we are free to support secular charities, or college alumni organizations, or advocacy groups, or whatever else we want. But the church comes first because God comes first.

V.

The phrase "thank you" frequently is used at the end of something. We say "thank you" as we leave someone's home, or after someone does something we appreciate.

That's 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 not as the end of anything. Rather we offer a continuing "thank you" as 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. Please do all you can and you will be blessed. *Amen.*