

Stewardship Sunday 11/15/2020

We are coming to the end of a year to remember. You've had to absorb the news of Fr. Turner's departure a year earlier than he originally planned, a new face leading you in worship on your computers and phones as a worldwide pandemic shut down so many things we have taken for granted, and a campaign and election for a President, Vice President and other officials. It seems hard to envision how we will be able to end the year with the usual joy of the wonderful holidays of Thanksgiving, Advent, Christmas and New Year's.

I'm going to invite you to reshape your perception of what this all means and what it doesn't mean. It means that things are and may likely continue changing. That represents both loss and opportunity. Change in parish and probably national leadership means a chance to expand our vision of who we are and what God is calling us to be. What has not changed, is our mission. as the body of Christ. At the heart of our mission is a calling upon the people of God to give of themselves in the service of the Gospel.

In its entirety, that is what stewardship means. We are stewards of God's creation, given to us as a blessing, and with a responsibility. Collectively, as we embrace ministry by offering the gifts and skills the Lord has given to us, we shape our common response to God's love of us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Over this past year, many people have stepped up in ministry to help St. Peter's Church prepare for its transition in ministry. What they have done, and you have responded to, will shape your ministry going into the future. And how all the people of God support that vision with tithes and offerings is the measure of your hope and faith.

When people hear the word stewardship, usually their first reaction is to think about what they will be giving to support the budget of their church. Is stewardship about financing the parish's budget? Yes and no. Your parish budget outlines how we will use the resources given by God's people to fulfill the mission that Christ has given us to accomplish. But your pledges shouldn't be about adding up to a certain figure that gets all the bills paid. They should be about honoring God with the first fruits of all you receive from God's bounty. You probably know that the Bible talks about the tithe, or 10% of your income, as the appropriate amount to return to the Lord. I can tell you this: most people are probably not giving a tithe of their income to their church and the other worthy causes they support. Why not? What gets in the way?

It's probably because we do think in terms of a budget. We reason that if together we all give enough to balance the budget, all is well and good. Except for one thing: giving to support an existing budget means giving to keep things just as they are, with the goal of providing the kind of ministry you find meaningful. The focus is on those who are already part of your parish family. If others choose to join you, they can help in covering your budgeted expenses, and possibly some needed repairs to your property and buildings.

So why should you even consider giving a tithe of your income, if your present level of giving is covering the bills? Isn't that the real question?

Let's acknowledge some truths so that we can begin to think about this matter in the way God wants us to be blessed. Jesus formed a church, but he never built a church building. That God allowed Israel's temples to be destroyed and not rebuilt seems to indicate that God has little interest in the preservation of buildings. God is interested in building His kingdom; a living, growing, fellowship of believers who give their lives to serving God in thanksgiving for all that God has done and provided for them. We offer God our "*sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.*"

Another truth has to do with recognizing that giving the tithe is our way of recognizing God's gracious generosity to us. God gives us 9/10s of all we earn to meet our own physical needs. The first tenth, the first fruits, is what we give to meet our spiritual needs. The tithe is about the most important things we give to ourselves.

The origin of the giving of first fruits in thanksgiving has nothing to do with supporting a building or a budget. In Genesis 4 we hear of the first offering of gifts to God: "*Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of the flock, their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.*" (Gen. 4:2-6)

Why did God have regard for Abel's offering but not for Cain's? I think the language gives us a hint: Cain brought "*an offering of the fruit of the ground*" whereas Abel "*brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions.*" Clearly Abel was offering the very best of his flock to God. Perhaps Cain was giving from the leftovers. The LORD invited Cain to think about this when he said: "*Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? If you do not do well, sin is lurking at your door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.*" God was warning Cain about the spiritual danger of giving with a begrudging attitude, and inviting him to give the very best with joy.

I have found a similar dynamic at work in the life of the church. The most faithful givers are also the most joyful, whereas those who give the least are often the ones most critical of how their dollars are being spent. They give from a sense of scarcity, and often feel that acts of compassion and outreach are a waste of scarce resources. Or when angry, they withhold their tithes. Or fear keeps them from trusting, like the last servant.

Secondly, your tithes are a symbol of thanksgiving for your redemption. What is our story of redemption? When Jesus offered himself upon the cross for the sins of the whole world, he broke down the walls of separation between Jews and Gentiles and we all became children of God and heirs of

salvation. St. Peter describes the church of Jews and Gentiles this way: *“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you might proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”* (1 Peter 2:9-10)

Jesus Christ is the King of all kings, the Lord over all Lords. We are his disciples, entrusted with the precious gospel of salvation. Outside these walls are millions of people still stumbling through life in darkness. They have never heard or believed that they can be children of God through the blood of Christ. They are our mission field, our purpose in Christ. And if every individual church in the world were content to pass a budget to meet only their own needs, how would those lost souls ever come to know the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ?

Giving just enough to support a budget to satisfy your own needs is to think so small, and to miss out on the great joy that comes from moving beyond a balanced budget to empowering life changing and soul saving ministry to the whole world.

I discovered this joy when I was in my mid twenties and raising a family with two young children. As I read my Bible, I kept coming across this challenge to give the very best to the Lord. Until then I had been giving from the leftovers: what I could spare after paying our bills and doing the things we wanted to do. Yet I knew the Lord was inviting us to grow in him by honoring him with our first fruits offerings. So we made some adjustments and began to give the full tithe. And as we did so, the things we sacrificed couldn’t compare with the joy we experienced in acknowledging God as first in our lives with our tithes.

I challenge each of you to think large, to ask yourselves not just “what is enough” but rather “what more can we do” as faithful disciples of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Take the first step in moving towards a tithe, and each year continue to do so until you are able to bring the full tithes into God’s house. Hear the LORD’s challenge and promise through the prophet Malachi: *“Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.”* (Mal. 3:10)

You’ve taken many steps towards fulfilling your mission. Will you keep taking steps in faith? God says, “Put me to the test.” See if you can out-give God. There’s one way to find out: by giving cheerfully, giving generously, giving with a grateful heart in thanksgiving for all that God has done for you. Soon you will discover what others have learned, that your greatest joy comes not from what you keep, but from what you return to the Lord in thanksgiving.

God loves a cheerful giver. May God continue to bless you all during this season of thanksgiving.

