

Stewardship Sermon

October 1, 2006

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James 4:7-10,13-5:6, Mk. 9:38-43,45,47-48

This is the sermon in which I try to speak openly about money and the church – the sermon about the “S” word – Stewardship. And today, I don’t mean time and talent, I mean treasure – money.

Interestingly enough, as a colleague pointed out to me years ago – when you bring up pledging money to the church, people often and quickly remind you that time and talent are important too and shouldn’t we talk more about them? But when you start talking about gifts of time and talent, it’s almost never that someone says, “Yes, but shouldn’t we talk more about money?”

In any case, you’ve already heard one money sermon just a few minutes ago. It’s from the Letter of James, which was actually written as a type of sermon to be read in early Christian churches. This passage is pretty brutal! – awful! – full of condemnation, especially of the rich! Listen to this again: “Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have lived on the earth in luxury and pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter”. We can say, well, that was a different context – James was talking to the rich and powerful who were persecuting Christians, not the faithful. We can decide for ourselves whether such words have any relevance to our lives today.

That passage, and the Gospel as well, with the cutting out and cutting off of eyes and hands and feet, the worm and the unquenchable fire are way too much fire and brimstone for me! Hearing them and trying to make sense of them might be good for us at some point, but not today!

James’ sermon is not mine. I have other words to offer, not accusation, not threats, but, hopefully, honest, direct encouragement and affirmation of the value of what you all give to St. John’s. The money you give to St. John’s is a huge amount – our expected pledge income for this year is over \$620,000, with non-pledge giving and all sorts of additional contributions totaling way more. Our budget this year is \$845,000. A big chunk, about \$133,000, comes from other groups who use our space, mostly the Oneness Family School, but most of the rest comes from you. Whatever the size of your pledge, it is important – it is part of your relationship with St. John’s.

Our relationships within the church and with our church are counter-cultural, and should be. By that, I mean that we're not here to look out for #1 but for each other and a hurting world. You may have heard this quote from Fritz Perl, described as a "guru of self-realization psychology: "I did not come into this world to meet your expectations, nor did you come into the world to meet mine...If we happen to connect, that's beautiful. If we do not, then no one is to blame." What a sad, vague and random view of connections, of community! As if it is all just happenstance. As a faith community, just as in a marriage or a family, we do have expectations. We need each other and depend on each other, and how we act and treat each other matters. How can our lives matter if we have no expectations, nothing to live up to or into?

Our St. John's community has an enormous amount to give - to all of us to be sure, but to others as well. We expect that from our church. When a stranger calls, seeking a funeral on short notice, but not a member, only loosely connected, we can give that. As Harrison said, as the staff pondered how to bring the funeral off in the middle of the rummage sale day, "We have a solemn obligation to bury the dead." We do, and I love the idea of solemn obligation - the gravitas and dignity of it. We have many other solemn obligations as a church: to baptize and confirm, to attend to faith formation in children and adults alike, to offer worship that is beautiful, challenging and spiritually nourishing. To help the poor, to provide hands-on ways to do this, to see that our space is well-used by other groups that need it. We have a solemn obligation just to be here, a tower with a gold cross on the corner, a place where, yes, the pastor is in, yes, you can get married, yes, you can take communion, yes, you can participate, be in fellowship with all ages, yes, you are welcome, and welcome to come as you are! These are the things we expect of our church, and, I venture to guess, what many others who don't come here or to any church, expect even so. It matters that we are here; it is good for us to be here!

And, because being part of church is being in relationship, your church has expectations of you, and I must say you have met them faithfully for years and years and continue to do so. It's not happenstance - it takes thought and care and mutual respect and trust, and it is beautiful! Far more so that just "happening to connect".

I've laid out expectations we have of the solemn obligations of our church. Here are expectations our church has of us - our solemn obligations. We need to pay for the expenses of running St. John's. We need to pledge enough money to support our budget. (Remember, time and talent, showing up, are a huge part of this too, but today is about money).

I'm afraid one misunderstanding that may be around here at St. John's is that the finance committee and vestry and clergy decide on what St. John's will offer – our program and the staff and physical plant required to carry it out. It's really you who decide, based on what you contribute. The finance committee figures out each year how much everything we have been doing will cost for the next year. Our elected representatives, the vestry, suggest priorities based on what you have said you want, what you expect, what you feel is less important, and then propose a budget, based on your expectations. Not that it satisfies everyone, but the budget is a collective best guess at what we need to offer in the coming year and how much it will cost. The expectation is that you are willing to pay these costs, and, if you don't choose to, then St. John's will not be able to meet your expectations of it, nor those of the wider world – the many outreach efforts we fund and our diocese, among others.

Please read the Stewardship packet, including a very clear, very informative booklet that you will shortly receive in the mail about both the strengths and the costs of our programs. Please read the part about proportional giving. That is a Biblically based expectation of all of us, that we give some of what we have away to sustain our communities and help others. Please don't decide on your pledge until you've thought about these expectations - that we all contribute to pay the costs of our church and that we do so in proportion to our own resources.

The choice is up to you. The success of our stewardship campaign depends on you and not the marvelous group of volunteers, led by Suzanne Welch and Nancy Petrisko, who have prepared the mailing, planned the upcoming celebration on Oct. 21, arranged for Crossroads pieces and gotten the word out in so many ways. They are doing their job, but the success of the campaign rests with all of us. It's up to us to weigh what we expect from our faith community and what our faith community expects of us. Do we have a deal? Can we consciously, faithfully and boldly commit to paying the cost of being St. John's in 2007?

This cost, by the way will be on the order of 16-20% above last year's. I know, it sounds like a lot – you can read your packet or request a draft copy of next year's budget to see what is needed. For a year's pledge, an increase of that much seems like a lot, but I ask you to do the math for a week. I suspect that, for most of us, that's in the category of a Starbucks visit or a carry-out lunch, maybe a movie. My point is, that if we could all stretch to that increase or towards it, our vestry could pass a budget that adequately funds our mission for 2007.

Preaching so directly about money is off-putting to some, I know. But I so much want us all to be aware of what is being asked and why and what it will

take from each of us to do it. I don't want us to be frustrated and disappointed by unmet expectations. I want us to rejoice in the ministry we do here and the collective generosity of this community. Whether your gift is large or small, or in the broad middle category, please increase it if you possibly can. At the end of the day, pledges are personal, private, a matter for you and perhaps other members of your family to discuss and pray about. But they are also part of the relationship we have with one another here at St. John's, the mutual expectations we have. Giving together here is one of the ways we love one another, one of the ways we love God and the life and the world God has given us. Amen.