

Building for the Future Through God's Grace Today

October 14, 2007

I.

Two things are happening today. One is that after the service many of us will go to work on the inside and outside of the church. We call this the annual "fall clean-up." The other is that today also is the day our Stewardship Committee's schedule calls for me to preach a sermon about stewardship. A cynical person might say this is another type of fall clean-up.

But it really is not. Stewardship is not just in the fall, but year-round. It's something we do all the time in thanksgiving for the gifts that God has given us. Of course, once a year we do focus on the financial aspects of stewardship, and we ask the congregation to prayerfully consider how Christian stewardship can support our community of faith here at St. Thomas. But our financial support is offered in the larger context of acknowledging God's blessings.

In thinking about how some people look at stewardship, I recall the story about two men out sailing, and a storm came up and they were shipwrecked on a desert island. The first man said "I'm going to walk around and look for food and water." He came back very discouraged after a while because he had found nothing 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."

II.

Well, that's 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 professional society, or homeowners' association, for example.

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 to the group unless we pay, and the purpose of dues usually is to keep the lights on and the doors open..

In the same way, there can be a tendency in some churches to think that financial support is intended to meet operational requirements. It costs money to run the church and so that's why some people give. They have to keep the operation going so they can use it. Well, that's true, but it is not the reason we give. There's a lot more to it.

Stewardship in the church is not like supporting a club or association. There is no monetary price of admission here. You don't have to pay to pray. Anyone can walk in here off the street and worship right beside someone who has been here since the church was founded.

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.

Stewardship therefore is a personal spiritual discipline and not merely a budgetary decision that is made once each year. In a significant way, stewardship is part of you and your life of faith that just happens to affect the church.

III.

Now, having pointed out that stewardship is a spiritual discipline through which we respond to God's blessings, let me also mention the reality of the challenges we face. St. Thomas has not operated with a balanced budget from pledges and plate receipts since 2003. Reserves always have been available to fill the gap, and they still are.

But beginning in 2008, things will be different in two ways. First, the Diocese of Mississippi, which subsidized much the operations of all churches on the coast in 2006 and 2007, including St. Thomas, will not be able to continue that financial assistance. Second, our needs include reaching into the growing community of young people in the Diamondhead area, and expanding our Sunday School and youth programs. This, in turn, means adding a Youth Director to the staff and incurring additional expenses for youth ministry.

We are working on a plan to become self-sustaining, hopefully in two years. You already have received materials from our Stewardship Committee with additional details. And one of those details calls for a 30% increase in stewardship for 2008.

Recognizing that this is a big request, the Stewardship Committee and the Vestry are sponsoring an open Stewardship Forum here at the church next Saturday, October 20, at 10:00 am to answer questions, provide information, and hear comments and suggestions about the plan. This is mentioned in the News and Announcements part of your service bulletins, and we encourage you to participate in whatever way you wish.

IV.

And as we think about how we will respond to this challenge, I remember the old story about the talking money. We all probably have heard that money talks, but this is a different perspective on that old saying.

It seems that a one hundred dollar bill, and a twenty dollar bill, and a five dollar bill were all talking to each other about where they had been recently.

The hundred dollar bill told how he had been on a cruise in the South Pacific, and then spent some time in a casino, and after that he went to Hollywood and hung around with some movie stars.

The twenty dollar bill said that he had been to a professional football game, and then went to a play and a movie before ending up at a fancy restaurant.

The five dollar bill just sighed, and said that his life was really boring. All he ever had done was just travel from one church to another.

Well, if our money could talk I am confident it would tell a different story. I believe that when our stewardship campaign is finished, it will be a story of generosity, and of recognizing the blessings God has given us. In the end, all creation is God's anyway, including our money. He has blessed us by letting us use it, but he calls us to use it in noble and worthy ways.

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 tells us not to lay up for ourselves treasures

on earth, but to lay up treasures in heaven, for where our treasure is, there will our hearts be also.”

I suspect we would agree that Matthew is pretty close to the mark. People spend money on things that are important to them, and things that are important usually find their way into the budget.

So stewardship 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 should briefly discuss the concept of the tithe, and the alternative idea of voluntary proportional giving.

V.

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

There is a faithful way to respond no matter what your financial picture might be. It is the approach 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 the diocese recommends for member support of the parish.

In short, the idea is to prayerfully consider one’s circumstances, seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and decide upon a percentage of income that can be devoted to stewardship. It might be ten percent, or more than ten percent, or less than ten percent. That’s an individual decision made with God. And if circumstances require it to be less than ten percent, then raising the percentage could be a goal in coming years. But whatever it is, if prayerfully considered, will be pleasing to God and will honor him.

Susan and I have been tithing to the church, and will continue to do so. Members of the Vestry and Stewardship Committee are committed to voluntary proportional giving, including tithing where possible. We hope you all will prayerfully join with us as the stewardship programs goes forward and comes to a conclusion on Stewardship Sunday, November 18.

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 for us. We say “thank you” when bringing closure, or in wrapping things up, or as polite last words before moving on.

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 part of our spiritual discipline. We certainly express gratitude to God for the things he has done, but our gifts to God 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. In this way we live the lives that God wants us to live.

We soon will recite the Prayers of the People, and we will express our thanksgiving “for all the blessings of this life.” In doing so 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.*