

Of Thine Own I Will Give Thee

1 Chronicles 29:10-14

October 19, 2008

I.

It's that time of the year again. Our stewardship campaign has begun, and the stewardship schedule calls for me to preach a sermon on stewardship today. In a way, I wish I could preach on something else since this is my first time back in the pulpit since August. And if anyone is here for the first time today, please don't get the wrong idea. We don't always talk about money, but sometimes it's necessary to do so. Today is one of those times.

But before I begin, Susan and I would like to thank you for the support you have given us during this difficult time. Your visits, your cards, your prayers, and all of the other things you are doing for us mean more than you might imagine.

Perhaps a good way to begin is to repeat something I said last year at our stewardship dinner. There is good news and there is bad news. The good news is that we have all the money we need to do the things that we want at St. Thomas. The bad news is that it's still in your wallets. And we hope that the recent news about the stock market has not affected you.

During this stewardship campaign we're once again going to ask you to open your wallets if you can. And we're going to do our best to assure you that we are spending your money wisely. As part of that process, we are holding a Stewardship Forum next Saturday morning in Johnson Hall at 10:00 am. Representatives of the Stewardship Committee and Vestry, as well as myself, will be there to answer any questions you might have about stewardship and the budget. Please attend if you have questions of any kind.

I would like to divide the rest of my remarks into two parts. First, I want to touch upon the church's current financial situation. Second, I want to talk about the true meaning of stewardship as we decide on our pledges for 2009.

II.

Let's go to our situation here at St. Thomas. Normally I would not talk about these matters from the pulpit. Instead you would hear from the Stewardship Chairman, or Senior Warden, or someone else in a leadership position.

But this year I believe it's important for me to mention some of these realities in a general way. I might not be doing my job if I did not do so. And I can assure you that others who are working hard on these things can fill in the details.

In summary, the news is not as good this year as it was this time last year. Last year at the end of September we were substantially ahead in collecting your pledges. This year we are substantially behind.

And perhaps there are reasons for this. Perhaps our 2008 budget was too high. Perhaps some of you are experiencing financial pressures this year that were not there last year. Perhaps others are just waiting until later in the year to catch up.

We ask that, if at all possible, you do catch up. In July the church office mailed each of you a summary of your pledge and payments, and will mail another in November. And feel free to call Debbye if you want to check your status that way.

We also are operating on a budget that is balanced only because we have, with the vestry's approval, temporarily transferred funds from our reserve account into our operating account. Obviously it is not a good practice to pay our bills by dipping into our reserves.

So, it's apparent that we need to truly balance the budget as soon as we can. In the past we received diocesan subsidies linked to Hurricane Katrina, and during part of that time the church had no priest. This created a rosy financial picture in the short-term because our expenses were artificially low while our receipts were artificially high.

But now, things are different. We don't have those other ways to make up a budget deficit. We are going to have to make up the difference ourselves. Or else we are going to have to cut our expenses, which are at a minimum already. That approach could affect our youth programs and be detrimental to our efforts to make the church grow.

III.

So let's think about how we're going to make our pledges for 2009. And I would like to approach this from a different angle. Most of you probably know that I recently spent twenty-two days in Gulfport Memorial Hospital because of some unpleasant after-effects flowing from a routine surgical procedure.

This has been a transforming experience for me. I have experienced sickness and suffering from a new perspective, namely being the patient in the bed rather than the priest coming to visit.

And I had a lot of time to think about the things I have been preaching the last two years. During this time I was reinforced in my belief that God does not cause the unfortunate events that befall us, and he is there to comfort us in our suffering and strengthen us in our weakness.

And I once again was reminded, as I pondered what lies ahead, that everything we have and all that we are results from God's grace. And this leads to the true meaning of stewardship.

IV.

Our stewardship theme this year is taken from the ancient words of the offertory. "Of Thine Own I Will Give Thee." "Of Thine Own I Will Give Thee." This confirms that everything we give to the church belongs to God anyway. We own absolutely nothing that is just ours. God has a claim over everything.

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 they retired. As a result, we might think that we can take all the credit for our accomplishments.

But let me suggest that our lives were given to us by God, and from the moment we were born our lives unfolded in accordance with the gifts, skills, and abilities that our creator imparted to us.

Certainly we worked hard. And we can take some credit for that. But 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. God helped us along the way even though it might not be readily apparent. We must accept that success is a blessing from God even though our own efforts also played a part.

And soon, when our stewardship campaign comes to a close, it will be time to return to God a portion of the blessings that he has given us. I pray that all of us, to the best of our abilities, will give God the credit that is due.

V.

And as I finish up I want to make two points. First, as I just said, I do pray that all of us give God the credit that is due. Our objective is that everyone would turn in a pledge card. We

need a 100% response, and we ask that if you have not pledged before, you consider doing so this year. I know from the results of our recent parish survey that some people do not believe in the idea of pledging. I pray that for 2009 you will reconsider. Try it. You might be surprised at how it draws you closer to God.

Now, the second point. I just mentioned the results of our parish survey. Part of that survey also requested demographic data, and many people answered the question about household income. Some skipped over it, but the responses were more than sufficient to give us a reliable sample.

As your rector, I am obligated to tell you that there is a disconnect between household incomes and the amount of our pledging units. The basic fact is that our pledges are noticeably low in relation to the higher income levels indicated on the surveys. And although I am sure some of you tithe, it appears that tithing is not part of the culture of the church.

And perhaps there are reasons for this. People lost their homes during Katrina. Unanticipated financial burdens might have arisen. Circumstances are different for each family.

And perhaps there also can be a tendency to look at financial support of the church in the same way as we look at paying dues to a country club, or professional society, or the POA, for example. In those cases there is a transaction. We pay something and we get something.

That's not the way it works for churches. Stewardship is not like supporting a club or association. There is no monetary price of admission here. You don't have to pay to pray. And you don't give to the church with an expectation of receiving anything for it. God's blessing will be there, but it will be through his grace

The basic fact is that we are stewards of the gifts God has given us. And faithful stewardship means returning a portion of these gifts to God in thanksgiving for what he has done for us. It is a personal spiritual discipline, and not merely a budget decision we make once each year.

VI.

So, I ask you, if you do not yet tithe the biblical ten percent and think you might be able to do so, please give it a try. If you are not able to tithe, please select a lower percentage, eight percent, six percent, whatever is possible, and offer that to the Lord. Perhaps this can lead to tithing later.

And if you have not pledged before, please prayerfully consider doing so this year. This is everyone's church and we need everyone's help.

I know from my experience with other churches that a church like St. Thomas should be able to fund its operations from the plate and pledges. But I also realize that times have been tough for many of us, we have been through a hurricane, and recent economic conditions are not a good sign. Please pray about your stewardship decision. More than once. Start now. Pray daily. With an open mind ask God what you should do. We really need your help. And if you follow our Lord's leading, whatever it is, you will honor God and will truly be blessed. *Amen.*