

## ***Receiving Through Grace, Giving In Faith***

Deut. 8:17-18

September 20, 2009

### **I.**

As you can tell from the materials in your service bulletins, our stewardship campaign for 2010 officially begins today. According to the schedule adopted by the stewardship committee, this is the day I preach a sermon about stewardship rather than discuss one of the readings.

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 appropriate because stewardship is an important spiritual practice in our lives and in the life of the church. This is one of those times we hear about it.

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 lonely 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 they thought about money all the time. 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.**

That story illustrates some of the negative ways in which stewardship can take on a commercial or business aspect. But I do not believe it is how we understand stewardship at St. Thomas. We are not here just to ask you to give money to the church. Rather, we hope that you will prayerfully return some of your blessings to God.

The theme of our stewardship campaign this year is "Receiving Through Grace, Giving In Faith." In a way, that says it all. What we have has been given to us through God's grace, and the way in which we respond is grounded in our faith. We are stewards of the gifts God has entrusted to us, and faithful stewardship means returning a portion of those gifts to God in thanksgiving.

However, there are some false impressions floating around in parts of our popular culture. And you can hear them from churches as well as church members.

Some churches, for example, emphasize financial support only to meet operating requirements. It costs money to run the church and so that's why they ask people to give.

And some members consider financial support of the church to be like paying dues to a secular organization—a country club, or a homeowners' association, for example. They pay something and they get something. There is a transaction. A *quid pro quo*. They have to pay to use the facilities or belong to the group.

But if that's the primary focus of those churches, they are very close to changing who they are and becoming just another social club. And if any church limits its vision to only what it already knows it can accomplish on its own, without God's help, then it probably is not much of a vision.

And before going further, I want to be clear that I do not diminish the importance of paying our bills. Two members of the Vestry spoke to you last June about budget cuts we made earlier in the year. And we had a special meeting of the congregation in July to point out that even with

those cuts we have had to use our reserves to meet basic operating expenses. The essence of that meeting was the need to increase our receipts.

But even so, there is more to stewardship than just debits and credits. It also is a personal spiritual discipline and not just a budgetary decision. A wise old priest once said it is more important that people give than the church receive. And the reason is that stewardship is part of our lives of faith and a way to honor God.

### **III.**

Let me go back to our stewardship theme this year. "Receiving Through Grace, Giving In Faith." This calls us to think about why we have what we have. It challenges us to recognize what God has done for us in every part of our lives, including life itself.

And I will be the first to acknowledge that sometimes we can take our blessings for granted, or give ourselves all the credit for our achievements. After all, we live in America. It's a free country, and we can own things and do with them as we wish so long as we don't break any laws. If we work hard we can succeed and enjoy the fruits of our labors.

And that's all true. But we cannot ignore the Bible, which proclaims that everything belongs to God, and we are the managers, the stewards, of that which God has entrusted to us. The distinction is that in God's eyes he has given us our resources, but in our eyes we have earned them. And that's fine when we are talking to each other. Among ourselves, apart from God, we can take credit for what we have accomplished. But in the big picture, we must give credit to God.

Here is an example of how these ideas interact. Suppose a hypothetical person said to me, "I regularly get up at 5:00 am. I frequently work late. I came up with the new design, the bright idea, the new process that put us on the map. My company is successful because of me."

And this person could continue by saying, "Now, Father Bill, I don't want to sound ungrateful, and I don't want to diminish God, but I got what I have because I worked hard. And when you say that all I have is just on loan from God, that seems to minimize my own efforts."

And the same thing could be said about mothers who work at home, or people who spend their lives helping charities, or soldiers who serve their country. They work hard too.

But, back to the example. I would respond to that hypothetical person and say that you are able to get up at 5:00 am and work late because you have the gifts of health and energy. God gave you those. Everyone does not have them.

And I would say that you came up with the bright idea, or the new invention or process that helped your company, because you had the gift of creativity. God gave you that. Everyone does not have it

I also could say that you succeeded because you had the gifts of drive and ambition. And you were able to make good decisions because you had the gifts of judgment and intelligence. God gave you those. Everyone does not have them.

Finally I would point out that from time to time the ball bounced your way. You had a break or two. Those also were blessings that God gave to you.

And I could conclude by quoting the biblical verse on the front of our bulletin insert today. It is Deuteronomy 8:17-18, which 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."

In fact, our very existence and our lives are gifts. We are here because God put us on earth and gave us the wherewithal to make something of ourselves. And we have the good fortune to live in this country. A recent study showed that middle class Americans are better off than ninety seven percent of the people in the rest of the world.

So, I ask us to think about it. We truly have been blessed. And even though we do encounter difficulties in our lives, God has helped us through them. The fruits of our lives are God's gifts, and faithful stewardship calls us to return a proportion of those gifts to God.

And I use the word "proportion" intentionally because it underlies how we can make our stewardship decisions. It involves the concept of the tithe, and its first cousin, proportional giving.

#### **IV.**

As Christians the biblical tithe of ten percent is the standard to which we aspire, if we are able. For some, ten percent of income is not possible, while for others it 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.

The idea is to prayerfully consider your 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. If your decision, whatever it might be, is made in this way it will be pleasing to God and will honor him.

Susan and I have tithed to the church every year, 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 program goes forward and comes to a conclusion on Stewardship Sunday, November 15.

#### **V.**

So, as we prepare for this time of stewardship, I remember the old story about the talking money. We all 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 swapping stories with 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 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 recognition of the blessings God has given us. And I pray that we all may be led to a faithful expression of thanksgiving for those blessings through our stewardship decisions. *Amen.*