

Remembering Our Blessings

Luke 12:22-31

September 19, 2010

I.

Two years ago today I was in the hospital. Most of you probably remember that time. I was there for twenty-two days as a result of unanticipated complications following a routine medical procedure. I ended up with nerve damage in my leg and could not move it. At the time the doctors would not tell me whether it would completely heal. Their prognosis always was qualified.

And although I returned to work in November it was not until the following May, nine months later, that I finally felt fully recovered.

During those early months, in September and October, I could not do much. I would just sit around, or try to do my exercises, and generally aggravate Susan. And you all were nearby. Your visits, your cards, your meals, and your prayers meant a lot.

It also was a time for me to think, and to pray, and to read. This took me even deeper into the Bible. And I frequently was comforted by today's Gospel reading from Luke, which also is in Matthew's Gospel (6:25-33).

Jesus said not to worry. It won't change a thing. And he used birds and flowers to make the point that if God will so abundantly care for them, there is no doubt that he will care for us. He also mentioned King Solomon, who was legendary for his wealth, and said that nothing Solomon possessed could even compare to God's provision for us.

But this reading is not a call to indifference. Jesus did not ask his disciples to just sit back and relax. He spoke of what is important and what is not. He wanted his disciples to know that if they only worried about the world, they would not know God. But if they made God their first priority, then they also would lack for nothing they needed.

And during my recovery I came to know that I would be OK. I would have to wait a while to see whether I could run up and down the stairs like before, but I felt at peace with the situation. I knew that God would provide.

II.

Many of us probably have been in somewhat similar situations, to greater or lesser degrees. And hopefully those situations have resulted in a deeper appreciation of the many blessings God has given to us.

This leads into our theme for today. As you can tell from the materials in your service bulletins, our stewardship campaign for 2011 officially begins today. According to the schedule adopted by the stewardship committee, this is the day I preach a sermon about stewardship. We also will commission the stewardship committee just before we share the Peace.

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 few times we hear about it.

But this time I would like to talk about stewardship in a slightly different way. And of course, I feel that duty requires me to review how God calls us to stewardship through the pledges we will be asked to give. But I also would like to spend some time talking about the blessings through grace we have received.

III.

So, let's quickly go over the basics of our stewardship campaign. Last year we focused on funding operations without using reserves. That emphasis continues. And recently we have become a little concerned because in the last three months we have fallen behind on receiving our pledges.

Even so, this year we want to ask you to consider two additional stewardship themes. First, Diamondhead is growing and membership at St. Thomas has not been keeping pace. We want to develop resources to bring new people into the church to share our worship and fellowship.

Second, more younger families are living in the community, and we want our Sunday School and youth programs to include them. We hope next year that we can have resources to address these matters. The Vestry at its recent retreat unanimously agreed to make priorities of both.

And before I speak of the holy nature of stewardship, I probably should address two common misconceptions about it. Some churches emphasize financial support to meet operating requirements. It costs money to run the church and so that's why they ask people to give.

Other churches treat financial support like paying dues to a secular organization—a country club, or a homeowners' association, for example. The members pay something and they get something. There is a transaction. They pay to use the facilities and they belong to the group.

But we know that stewardship is more than that. It also is a personal spiritual discipline; not just a budget decision. Stewardship is part of our lives of faith and a way to honor God. The church is Christ's body he left behind. And faithful stewardship is how we care for the church and return to God a portion of the blessings God has given us.

And how do we know what that portion is? 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.

But there is a faithful way to respond no matter what our financial circumstances might be. It is the approach of voluntary proportional giving. That standard is used throughout the Episcopal church, as well as by other denominations.

It's pretty simple. Just prayerfully consider your situation, seek guidance from the Holy Spirit, and decide upon a percentage of income to be devoted to stewardship.

And it might be ten percent, or more than ten percent, or less than ten percent. That's an individual decision made with God. But 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 began to tithe many years ago in Virginia. On occasion we weren't sure we could do it. But we found every time that, by trusting in God and stepping out in faith, we somehow always were able to fulfill our pledge. It is a discipline we continue to follow.

IV.

And now, let's look at the other side of the coin and consider how today's reading echoes two themes that are the source of our blessings. One is that we are called to trust in God, and the other is that God will provide.

Many of you might remember the catchy little song, "Don't Worry, Be Happy" by Bobby McFerrin. It won the Grammy Award for "Best Song of the Year" in 1989. It was about being laid back and taking life as it comes. But that is not what Jesus meant in today's reading.

When Jesus said not to worry he was speaking seriously, but not literally in all things. We might worry about our golf score when playing in a tournament. Or we might worry when the Saints have the ball fourth and one on the Vikings three yard line with eight seconds left in the game.

But how important are those worries the day after the tournament, or the day after the game? Haven't we moved on to other things? And aren't we looking forward with hopeful anticipation to the next tournament or the next game?

Jesus was not talking about these kinds of anxieties. He used examples of money, food, drink, and clothing. They are essentials. And he just as easily could have used families, children, jobs, or elderly parents. These are issues that can make us focus on the world instead of God.

But Jesus tells us that in God alone we find the strength and support to carry us through life. In fact we owe our very lives and existence to God. They are his gifts. We are here today because God's blessings made it possible.

St. Paul said in his letter to the Philippians, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (4:6-7).

The peace of God; yet another wonderful blessing. And it can take many forms. It comes with the birth of our children or grandchildren. We know God was part of those miracles. It comes as we see our children grow up. Again, we sense God's presence. It comes, as it came to me two years ago when I was hobbling around on a walker. Through God's peace we know we will be all right.

And we also know God's peace and blessings are right here in the church. They are here as a child is baptized into the life of Christ, or as a son or daughter is united in marriage, or as an aged parent is sent into the blessed rest of everlasting life. And they are here every Sunday as we come to the communion rail to share in the presence of Jesus Christ.

Again, we can turn to St. Paul for his inspired words in his letter to the Romans. He said, "All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (8:28). We know that God has blessed us, and we can trust that he always will bless us.

V.

Our reading ends with Jesus calling us to seek God's kingdom, having faith that he will provide. Seeking means trusting in this context. We are to trust that God's kingdom is on its way, and will fully be here when Jesus comes again.

In the meantime we give thanks to God and accept the fruits of his grace. He will support us when we need him, and his comfort will overcome our anxieties. This is the basis of stewardship.

At this point I could quote 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."

But this, of course, does not diminish the hard work that we do. God calls us to perseverance, and diligence, and discipline in our work and lives. But he also calls us to do these things for his kingdom, knowing that in him is our hope, and through him our faith is strengthened.

And so as our stewardship campaign begins, I also am confident that when it is finished it will be a story of generosity and of recognition of the blessings God has given us. I pray that we all may be led to faithful expressions of thanksgiving for God's grace in our lives. *Amen.*