

Stewardship 2021



The Book of the Wisdom of Solomon 3:1 "The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God."

So the story goes that a wealthy philanthropist died and went to heaven. He presented himself to St. Peter at the pearly gates, who flipping through the pages of the Book of Life couldn't find the man's name anywhere. "Do you know who I am," said the philanthropist. "I gave the new wing of the hospital, the one that is named after me!" "I endowed a chair at the university!" "I have donated thousands of dollars to charity!" St. Peter apologized as he continued searching through the pages desperately looking for his name. Then St. Peter reflected for a moment and asked, "Did you ever give without concern for yourself, without thinking about the notoriety you would receive, or the honor and appreciation that would be awarded you, or the tax deduction you would get? Did you ever give out of your abundance solely thinking about the needs of the other person?" "Hmmm," said the philanthropist thinking hard. "Well, now that

you mention it, once I gave a dollar to a poor beggar on the street, without even thinking about it!" "Good, good," said St. Peter encouraging him. "Anything else?" "Well, I now remember giving a dollar to a poor woman at the railway station once. She had a small child and looked so desperate." "Good, good," said St. Peter. But alas that was all the philanthropist could remember. Just then, Jesus walked by and St. Peter went over to consult with him as what to do about this philanthropist. After reviewing the facts, Jesus replied simply, "Give the man his two dollars back, and tell him to go the Hell."

Today is Stewardship Sunday. Two weeks ago or so, the Wardens of St. John's sent out a letter to all members of the parish requesting a financial pledge of support for our mission and ministry here for next year. Today, on All Saints' Sunday, the members of this congregation are asked, after prayerful consideration, to return those Pledge Cards, if they haven't already, as the Vestry begins working on a budget for next year, a crucial budget I might add, in the midst still of an ongoing pandemic. During this pandemic, we have struggled hard to adjust to ever changing circumstances, while still being good stewards of the bountiful inheritance that we have received in this church, and to serve the developing needs of our community. During the pandemic, as you all know, we organized special Food Drives, and then Blood Drives for our overcrowded hospitals,

then volunteered at our local Food Banks when the elderly volunteers withdrew for fear of Covid. We supported the Community Culinary School, the Literacy Volunteers, we organized back packs for our children when they finally returned to school, and have now begun the process of settling a Refugee in our community.

So, this then, is my Stewardship Sermon. And I suppose that if I had advertised that I would be preaching on stewardship beforehand, some people won't have come to church this morning. It is sad, but the simple fact of the matter is that most of us don't like talking about money in church, and so many priests try to limit it to this one a year --- which is very odd when you think about it, because Jesus talked a great deal about money and possessions. In fact, more than 80% of what Jesus had to say was about money and possessions. For Jesus, what we did with our money and our possessions was ultimately a spiritual question, not a financial one. Yet when we talk about money and possessions, we get uncomfortable. We get anxious or embarrassed, or defensive or just irritated. Some churches use that guilt to their advantage, to increase giving, but I don't want us to feel guilty when we start a conversation about our stewardship of money and possessions.

I want us to feel blessed when we talk about our money and our possessions, because we are blessed. And this is the first

and most important point I wish to make this morning. We are blessed. When we look around the world, how can we feel anything but blessed? If one makes only \$55,000 a year, then that person is in the top 5% of the world's richest people, that's right, the top 5% of the world's 7.8 billion people. Let's get real, here. We are blessed. Three decades ago, the people in well-to-do countries like this one were 30 times better off than those in countries where the poorest 20 percent of the world's population live. By 1998, this gap had widened to 82 times better off, as the gap between the rich and poor continues to grow. We are more than 82 times better off than the bottom 20% of the world's population. We are blessed, and I want us to be able to openly and honestly acknowledge that, and to feel blessed and not guilty, whenever we begin a conversation about our money and our possessions.

And if nothing else, let us respond to our blessings with a deep sense of thanksgiving, thanking God that we are blessed. For though we often consider ourselves self-made men and women, and though we often credit ourselves and the hard decisions and choices we have made over the years as being the source for our money and our possessions, let us first be able to honestly acknowledge that *the* most important factors concerning our wealth, factors like when and where and to whom we were born,

were not in our control, were never in our control. So let us thank God for our fate and our blessings.

The next question, of course, is what are we doing with those blessings? And here I hope and pray that whatever we are actually doing with those blessings, that we will be characterized by others as being a thankful and generous people, not greedy and hoarding of God's blessings. Now it seems to be about this point in the conversation, that we often begin to become very uncomfortable, or embarrassed, or guilty. This is the crux of the problem because this is ultimately a spiritual question, about our very relationship with God and with God's people, by virtue of the blessings God has bestowed upon us. And if we are feeling uncomfortable, let us pay attention to that, rather than ignore or deny or suppress those feelings about what kind of stewards we really are.

Good stewardship is ultimately about a sense of being blessed by God, and being thankful to God, and being generous in our response to God. Stewardship is using the gifts and talents that God has given to each of us to do the work that God has given us to do. Stewardship is an invitation to offer up our gifts and talents for the very purpose for which we were created -- the only purpose that will ever fulfill us as human beings. Stewardship also offers us a way to begin breaking the bonds of consumption that involve us, often unwittingly, in perpetuating

social injustice and oppression and inequality among God's people. Stewardship is a challenge for us to refocus our lives by examining our personal spending habits and seeing those spending habits as an expression of our spiritual well-being and our trust in God. Stewardship is much more than an annual campaign to raise money to meet next year's budget. Stewardship is about considering the very nature of our relationship with God.

Nevertheless, in the fall of each year, we do ask our parishioners to give the Vestry some idea of their projected giving for the next year, so that we can plan accordingly and be responsible in our undertakings. Our annual pledge is in some sense a reflection of our personal Stewardship, of where we are on our spiritual journey, and where we are going. Still, I want to emphasize that our pledge is NOT meant to be 'dues' for church membership, nor is it meant to be 'our fair share' of covering the costs of this parish. Nor is our pledge meant to be motivated by our desire to support the programs of this congregation, as simply some sort of charitable giving for a good cause. Stewardship is ultimately NOT about fundraising; it is about faith-raising. The Biblical attitude for stewardship is that of the person who is giving to God in gratitude for what the person has received from God; an attitude of a deep-seated thankfulness, and of responding out of an overwhelming sense of

plenty, filled with God's blessings, and out of an abiding sense of trust in God's care for us. Part of good stewardship is to acknowledgement that we do not really own what we are giving away; we are only the stewards of these gifts. We mean quite literally what we say when we often repeat the Scripture on Sunday that "*All things come of Thee, O Lord; of Thine own have we given Thee.*" The idea that all things belong to God is what Jesus meant when he summarized the Law in last Sunday's reading, where Jesus commands us to love God with ALL that we have. This is the first and great Commandment, and the second is like unto it.

Rather than be guilt-ridden church members who feel compelled to grudgingly support their parish, let us be joy-filled church members who acknowledge that we are blessed, that we have been given so much by God that we feel duty bound and even delighted to be able to return a good proportion of our money and possessions back to God and to God's work in the world -- even if such giving means lowering our own standard of living a bit! For let us be clear that voluntarily lowering our standard of living in this way goes directly against our secular consumer culture, where one can never has 'enough,' while the concept of sharing what we have, is profoundly Christian, sharing out of our abundance with those who have not, with the least of them our brethren. That is good stewardship.

The Biblical standard of giving, of course, is the tithe, the returning to God 10% of what we receive and the trusting in God that we can more than manage our lives with the remainder. Most people are surprised to learn that more than 30 years ago the General Convention of the Episcopal Church declared that the Biblical tithe is the "minimum standard of giving" for Episcopalians, and they are even more surprised to learn that all clergy are required by canon law to preach about tithing at least once a year, though few clergy do. This is not a financial concern, but a spiritual matter. Now I know that the tithe isn't an easy concept for many; that it is even frightening for some, but I also know that once accomplished tithing removes those feelings of guilt and discomfort and embarrassment about our money and possessions, and replaces them instead with a great sense of thankfulness and generosity and joy.

If you have not yet reached the Biblical tithe in your giving, then I encourage you to commit to earnestly working towards that goal, increasing your giving each year by a percentage or two until you reach that biblical goal. That's how I did it, and I am still amazed at how easy and painless it was to do so, and how good it feels. I think that Lisa and I now give about 14% of our income away to our favorite churches and charities, because we are blessed and we have plenty.

Thus, I invite you this morning to enter into a relationship with God that when we talk about our money and our possessions, it doesn't involve a sense of guilt or shame or embarrassment, but instead involves only an overwhelming feeling of joy and plenty, and our responding sense of generosity and trust in God. AMEN.