



Jeremiah 13:1 "Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD."

Recently I heard the story about a new young priest straight out of seminary, who learned that one of the wealthiest members in his new congregation was not a regular contributor; in fact, the wealthy parishioner wasn't giving anything at all to the church, so the new young priest made a pastoral call to inquire as to why. "From all appearances your business is doing quite well, yet you haven't given a penny to your own church," the priest began. "Wouldn't you like to contribute to God's work

in this community?" The wealthy member replied, "Father, did you know that my mother is ill, and has extremely expensive medical bills?" "Um, no," mumbled the new priest. "Or that my brother is blind and unemployed? Or that my sister's husband died last year, leaving her in severe debt with four young children?" "I ... I ... I had no idea," said the priest apologetically. "So," said the wealthy member, "if I am not giving them any money, why do you think that I would give any to the church?"

The question before us this morning is about what kind of people we are, and about what kind of people God is calling us to be. This is not about St. John's. This is not about saving the parish, repairing the building, or preserving the future of this congregation. This is about our relationship with God, and with God's work in this community. This is about who we really are deep down inside, when all our masks have been removed and we are truly exposed. The question before us this morning is whether we are grateful, compassionate, and generous people, or not; --- or whether we are instead thankless, selfish, and fearful individuals, who just pretend to be something else. So, who are you really? For who we really are, is reflected in what we return to God through the Church, and why we do so?

This then, is obviously my Stewardship Sermon. It is sad, but the simple fact of the matter is that most of us don't like talking about money in church, so we try to limit it to once a

year --- which is very odd, 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. But when we talk about money and possessions, we get uncomfortable. We get anxious or embarrassed, or defensive or just downright 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 money and our possessions. I want us to feel blessed; because we are blessed. And this is the first and most important point I wish to make this morning about stewardship. We are blessed. When we look around the world, how can we feel anything but? In a world of the haves and the have-nots, we are clearly among the haves. According to the World Bank, about 10% of the world's now 8 billion people live on less than \$1.90 a day in 2022. An astonishing 67% of the world's population, more than 2/3s of the people living on planet earth, lived on less than \$5.50 a day in 2020. Many of us spend that much simply on our first cup of coffee in the morning. Children and youth account for two-thirds of the world's poor, and women represent a majority in most regions. So we are blessed, and so 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 for our good fortune. For while we often consider ourselves self-made men and women, and while we often credit ourselves and the 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* very 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 blessings, for we are inheritors of the good life.

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 as being thankful and generous people, and not as greedy and hoarding of God's blessings, or fearful and withholding of them. This is the crux of the problem, because this is ultimately a spiritual question, about our very relationship with God and God's people, and the blessings God has bestowed upon us. And if we are feeling uncomfortable, 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 God has given us, to do the work God has given us to do. Stewardship is an invitation to offer our gifts for the very purpose for which we were created - and the only real purpose that will ever fulfill us. Stewardship also offers us a way to begin breaking the bonds of consumption that involve us, often unwittingly, in perpetuating social injustice and oppression. Stewardship is a challenge for us to refocus our lives by re-examining our spending habits; and seeing those spending habits as an expression of our spiritual well-being and our care for God's people. Stewardship is much more than an annual campaign to raise money to meet next year's budget.

So for example, at the beginning of the pandemic, the seven religious congregations of Washington worked together to care to the people of this community who were suddenly in great distress, as an expression of our faith. So we organized a series of eight important Food Drives as our local food banks were depleted by those suddenly out of work, and we collected more than 13,000 pounds of shelf-stable food and household products (that 6 ½ tons), plus more than \$23,000 in cash donations. We also then began volunteering at our weekly Food Bank in Warren as their elderly volunteers stood down for safety

sake. Then we began gathering fresh fruits and vegetables weekly at the Farmers' Market in the Depot, along with financial contributions to support the Culinary School in New Milford that was suddenly preparing and delivering 1,000 meals a week to seniors housebound by the pandemic. We then began hosting the quarterly American Red Cross blood drives when pandemic restrictions ruled out continuing them at the Fire House where they had been set up since shortly after 9/11, and we began hosting those blood drives at the very time our hospitals were filling up with patients. Then some of us organized delivery of frozen meals made by the chefs at the Trinity Retreat Center in Cornwall, when it could no longer host retreats, so instead the trained staff too prepared about 1,000 frozen meals a week for local food banks, and St. John's delivered them each Monday for more than eight months to Kent, Warren, and Bantam. Meanwhile all this time, the clergy ministered to the sick and hospitalized when family wasn't allowed to visit them there. I gave Last Rites to at least three people fitted out as I was in surgical garb, gloves, masks, and even face shields. And we clergy buried the dead at graveside services where attendance was limited to less than a dozen people in most case. Then we worked together in this community to settle refugee families from Afghanistan. We did all of this, while continuing our 'regular' outreach projects like back-to-school backpacks, gift

cards for Thanksgiving, and presents for children at Christmas. And so, this is why I encourage you as a matter of stewardship to support the church, as an expression of our faith and our care for God's people, and as a sign of our own sense of blessing and thanksgiving.

And so in the fall each year, we 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, though there is really no telling what may happen in the year ahead. Remember if you decide to give the same amount you gave last year, that it will be worth about 8% less because of inflation. I have publicly announced that I am raising my \$5,000 a year pledge to \$6,000 next year in support of the life and ministries of this parish. I hope follow suit.

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. But I'll tell you what, 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. Stewardship is also 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. 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. I mean quite literally what I say when on Sundays 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, 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.

So rather than be guilt-ridden church members who feel compelled to grudgingly support their parish, let us be joy-filled church members who know 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, and time and talent, back to God and to God's work in the world --. That is good stewardship. AMEN.