

STEWARDSHIP 2025



Hebrews 10:25 "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and (to) good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another."

Many years ago, I was the Rector of Trinity Episcopal Church in Olde Towne, Portsmouth, Virginia. When the first Vestry of that Portsmouth Parish was formed in the year 1761, the Church of England had been established in the Colony of Virginia for 154 years already. As the established church, Trinity was granted by the Royal Colonial Government so-called

Glebe lands, farmland which was part of the clergyman's benefice providing income for the priest, as well as the Vestry being granted the right to tax 10%, the biblical tithe, of all income and goods produced in the parish. We call that "the good ole days!"

During the Revolutionary War, the Scottish Rector of the parish went off to fight with the patriots, while the King's Army occupied the town because of its important Naval Shipyard. Church services were discontinued during the war, and the King's army was said to have used the church as a stable for its horses! The second Rector established a school in the Glebe farmhouse after the war, which afforded him an income in lieu of the loss of taxation privileges, but in 1802, the new State of Virginia took back the Glebe lands of the churches and sold them for income. Thus, there was great anxiety after that, about whether the former Church of England parishes could survive, and how would they fund the parish clergy and maintain their buildings, especially since so many people saw the newly named "Episcopal Church" simply as a remnant of English domination. For ten years then, Trinity Church in Portsmouth was vacant, until a Presbyterian minister from Norfolk across the river began to come over and hold occasional services there. Then he suddenly announced his intention to hold services at the church every Sunday! The former parishioners took offense at this

declaration, and they locked him out of the building. A presbyterian church was built across the street the following year!

The question for the former parishioners of Trinity Church was how to fund a church without Glebe farmlands, or the power to tax the local people? So, several of the former leaders went over to Christ Episcopal Church in Norfolk to ask what they should do. The priest there advised them to secure for the next year agreements to rent the pews on an annual basis in anticipation of the resumption of Sunday services, gathering enough commitments by families to do so, that they could take that commitment to find and hire new priest! Annual pew rentals became then the principle means of funding Episcopal churches in the late 18th century. However, later in the 19th century there was some backlash against the practice of pew rentals because it resulted in the poor, those who could not afford to rent a pew, having to stand in the back of the church for services, especially when so many rented pews in the front were often empty on Sundays. So, some congregations changed their practices and allowed anyone to sit anywhere, while simply relying upon a so called "free-will offering" collected each week at the Sunday Services, to pay expenses, trusting in God that the weekly collection would provide enough money to pay the bills. That practice required more faith than most Episcopalians could

muster, so "pledging" became the favorite alternative. Parishioners were asked to state ahead of time what they imagined they would be giving to the church in the year ahead, to 'pledge,' confidentially of course, how much they were likely to give, in a non-committal sort of way. That way, the church leadership could organize some kind of reasonable budget to maintain the buildings and pay the priest. And that's the way most Episcopal churches in this country still fund themselves today. Thus the Stewardship Committee of this parish will be sending out letters and pledge cards this week to everyone on our mailing lists, asking parishioners to declare what they imagine they might be giving to the church next year, and the Stewardship Committee has set the date of Sunday, December 15th for the return of those pledge cards, giving the Vestry enough time to finalize a budget for next year before the Annual Meeting in January.

Thus, the question I often get asked at this time of year, especially by new parishioners, is how much should I be pledging? For many, the pledge is more like dues, comparable to joining a country club, for example, to secure a membership in a place where they can make friends, and have a nice setting for weddings and funerals. I also remember one 80-year-old parishioner in Bridgeport who pledged only \$20 a year so she could keep her 'membership' active, she said, so she could be

buried from that parish when she died. Is that what your giving suggests? Is the church just another social club for you, a place for weddings and funerals and social gatherings?

Others give to the church to support the life and ministries of the parish, as being very important to them, and to the larger community they think, providing a place for meaningful worship, to learn and study together, and to share with those less fortunate than us. So, what is your theology about personal pledging to this parish, because that will probably impact how much you pledge? Do you see your pledge more as an important membership to keep active, to keep the place open, or more as a means to direct your charitable giving back to God's work in this community, in thanksgiving to God for all that you have received?

I see the church as an important instrument of God's care for the world, and as such my wife Lisa and I take the biblical tithe seriously. We give 10% of our income to the church. So last year Lisa and I had an adjusted gross income of \$116,280. Thus, I pledged \$6,000 a year to St. John's, and Lisa does the same to her congregation in New Milford. I have my 1040 paperwork right here to prove it, if you doubt me. We also gave additional support to our favorite charities, like our seminary, or our individual colleges, or towards the capital campaign for Camp Washington, or to the Episcopal Relief and Development Fund

after various disasters, or to Lisa's favorite charity, Combatants for Peace in the Holy Land. Last year, we gave almost \$16,000 to charities out of our \$116,280 adjusted gross income.

There were, of course, times in our lives over the years when our giving suffered, when we couldn't meet the tithe, with marriages or the birth of children or unemployment or divorce, and we had to struggle each time to build our tithe back up to the 10%. We did it slowly but consistently increasing the amount we pledged year after year, until we achieved our goal, and then we surpassed it. I suggest that you all do the same, if you are not already tithing. Just take a look at last year's 1040, at your adjusted gross income, or even just your taxable income if you prefer, which is always less, and divide by 10. If you are giving less than that amount to the church and your favorite charities, I encourage you to find ways to slowly raise it to the biblical tithe.

For in the end, Lisa and I feel blessed with the lives we have, and we don't take credit for that alone, as though we earned those blessings or deserve them somehow. We thank God for the lives we share. And so, we take a portion of our good fortune to help others.

Now we are all blessed in this congregation, and in this country, and I hope and pray that our pledges will be given in response to that realization, out of a sense of our blessings

and not out of sense of guilt or obligation, not to simply to maintain this lovely building, or to pay for the clergy, but as an expression of who we are and what we value.

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 really about St. John's. This is not about saving the parish, repairing the building, or preserving the future of this congregation, though I hope you support all those things. This is about our relationship with God, and with God's work in the world around us. 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 might be thankless, selfish, and fearful individuals to some degree, who just pretend to be something else. Lisa and I share great joy in being able to support the charities we do, and I want you to feel that joy as well. And joy is not usually the emotion we feel when we talk about money in church!

So, if nothing else, let us respond to the blessings of our lives with a deep sense of thanksgiving and gratitude, thanking God for the lives we all have, and sharing with those less fortunate than us. Amen.