

Rev. Betsy Welliver Sentigar
Christ Episcopal Church - Towanda, Pa
23rd Sunday after Pentecost- Year B- Proper 26
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Stewardship Sunday- Of Thine Own Have We Given Thee

Much of this sermon is offered from a stewardship Sunday more than ten years prior in Grace Church Elmira. I have tailored this to reflect my observations here at this time and in this place.¹

All things come from Thee, O Lord and of Thine own have we given Thee.”

This traditional prayer is said during Mass when the offering plate is normally handed to the celebrant. Although we currently are not in this ceremonial practice, its wording contains the entire theology of Christian giving.

First of all, this prayer acknowledges that **all we are and have**, including life itself and goods, **is a gift from God**. Becoming aware of this is the source of gratitude, the most basic religious impulse. This gratitude should not be confused with a naïve optimism or ‘feel good religion which refuses to acknowledge suffering and tragedy. Rather, this gratitude arises

¹ Fr, Han vandenBlink PhD. *Sermon “Of Thine Own Have We Given Thee. Sept. 20, 2009*

out our a graced experience of **life as a gift, as a gift from God**, the One who created us and sustains us through everything in life and death.

Secondly, the prayer recognizes that a gift from God cannot and should not be hoarded. It needs to be shared. Gifts of whatever kind that we keep for ourselves, that we squirrel away for our own benefit, that we claim to be the only and rightful owners of, inevitably lead to a diminishment of our humanity or worse. We are created to be in relationship therefore sharing with others is an important part of fostering that human relatedness.

And thirdly, this prayer assumes that an important part of sharing what has been given to us, is giving a portion of our time, talents and treasure back to the Church. We do this in order to contribute our part to the fulfilling of God's purpose in the world.

The notion of tithing for the support of the poor,, "the alien, the orphan and the widow"(Deuteronomy 24:21-22) goes back to early Judaism.

Passages in the Old Testament refer to the obligation to tithe seed, grain,

wine, oil, and firstlings of herds and flocks. Later this list was expanded to include money.

There is, surprisingly, little mention of tithing in the New Testament. This is not because the early Christians were against tithing but because they did not think tithing was enough. We tend to forget that the early Church was thoroughly communitarian. The Acts of the Apostles, tells us that, “All who believed...had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need (2: 44-45). This helps provide us with the context of Jesus’ conversation with the wealthy man a couple weeks ago, to go and sell all that he had to follow him.

I am spending some wonderful time interviewing many of you. This takes time and is offering me wonderful insight to the nature of this communities commitment for renewal and invigoration. I am new to the inner workings of this parish. Yet I am deeply impressed with how individuals use their time, talents and treasure to foster this community.

I pray that despite the challenges that we all have faced in the past two years, that will faithfully and prayerfully make a renewing decision about our contributions. Consider the theme “***Broken Open***” and reflect on what

this theme means to you as a member of Christ Church, what it means personally and communally. It is a fitting theme for all of us this year.

I am proud that moving forward, the vestry is committed to a continuing transparency coupled in healthy financial practices. We are so fortunate to have leaders who are dependable, well versed in complicated regulations that have geared us towards disciplined practices required in church management.

Collectively, our giving to the church should be based on two things: 1) an understanding of the nature of the Church, and by extension our parish, and 2) an openness to experiencing the transcendent presence of the Holy Spirit. Only these two things have the power to elicit the necessary commitment and willingness to contribute as fully as we are able to do. Christ Church is a beautiful space of worship, beautifully cared for and maintained. It is a legacy of which has meant a great deal to the history of Towanda, its families and descendants.

It is so much more than that though as *it is the Body of Christ*. As such , we need to proceed prayerfully and prudently in this time of history. I point to some work in Natural Church Development by a German pastor

Christian A. Schwarz who stresses that the internal dynamics of a parish create the spiritual and numerical growth as opposed to programs that are imposed from above or outside. ²

There are eight qualities that his research teams have found in all manner of well functioning parishes and denominations all over the world.

These largely self-explanatory qualities are :

1. Leadership that empowers others
2. Ministry based on people's gifts
3. Passionate Spirituality
4. Effective structures
5. Inspiring Worship Services
6. Holistic small groups
7. Need- oriented evangelism
8. Loving relationships

I am struck by how many qualities I am witnessing in my initial experience here with you.

The ancient wisdom of our faith is that when we love our neighbor as ourselves, , we need to commit ourselves to each other with all the

² www.ncdcanada.com

strength and determination that we can muster, knowing that we are caught up in God's ever renewing and restoring agape love that continues to open up possibilities for forgiveness and new beginnings.

Living into these commandments is truly a Christian virtue. The apostle Paul describes *agape* as one of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5;22).

Here ***agape*** love, holds out for the best intention for the other. ***Agape love describes unconditional love***, the love that is not self seeking or looking to see what "I" can get out of the relationship. Agape love is the love that Jesus describes as God's love for all of his creation. ³

Hear O Israel The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. (Mark 12:30). The second is like unto it...

Agape is an earmark of authentic Christian community. It is the seedbed of spiritual growth and outreach to others. It has been a blessing for all of us to experience this amidst all the stresses and strains endured during the complex traumatic past year.

The greatest need in our time is for *Koinonia [Christian community]*, - the call to simply be the church —to love one another, and to offer our life for

³ *Ibid*

the sake of the world. The creation and sustaining of living, breathing, loving communities of faith at the local church level is foundational for all of life.

I close with a prayer for the Right Use of God's gifts: (BCP 827)

***Almighty God who loving hand has given us all that we possess:
Grant us grace that we may honor thee with our substance, and
remembering the account which we must one day give, may be
faithful stewards of thy bounty, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen***