

## A Sermon for Proper 23.C

### *Stewardship and Thanksgiving*

**Y**ou know the old preacher's story: Once upon a time, there were three bills sitting in a teller's drawer at the bank on a Monday morning—a fifty dollar bill, a twenty dollar bill, and a one dollar bill. They began to discuss their weekend. The fifty dollar bill had a good time on a mini-cruise out of Galveston. The twenty dollar bill was bragging about its good time at the sports bar. These two turned to the one dollar bill, asking what it had one for the weekend. The one dollar bill replied, "Oh, the same old dreary thing—I went to Church!"

October is the time when the clergy and people of this parish reconsider their financial stewardship. And this is a profoundly spiritual matter. I use the word *spiritual* because our stewardship of time, talent and treasure is sacramental. It is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. How people spend their time says something about what is important to them. How we spend out money likewise reflects our inward spiritual disposition. Stewardship is a spiritual matter, and that is why I preach about it.

**F**rom the story of the ten lepers (Luke 17:11-19), we learn that stewardship is not simply about money or fund-raising. Rather, stewardship is a dynamic process in three stages: First, it is a confession of who God is; secondly, a recognition of his action in our lives; and thirdly, a response of thanksgiving for what God has done for us.

Our Lord is met by ten lepers. Lifting up their voices they implored Jesus to heal them. And he did: on their way to the Temple priests they were cured. Nine of them went on their merry way without so much as a backward glance. Only one turned back to Jesus in thanksgiving.

The one leper recognized who God is: he is Lord. And at some time each of us is going to have to decide who is Lord of our lives. In one of the Psalms (46:10), God says this to us, "Be still, and know that I am God." But often we say to God, "No God, *you* be still, and know that *I* am god." Who is Lord of your life? Is it God the Father, Creator of heaven and earth, or is it yourself?

If you are the lord of your life, stewardship is difficult to understand. Either you will think that giving to the Church of your time, talent and money is a sort of heavenly insurance policy— just in case Christianity is true, just in case Jesus is indeed the Savior, and just in case you will be required to give an account of your stewardship when you stand before the dread judgment seat of Christ. Or you will give out of guilt, attempting to ease your conscience. Or you might give to the Church as you would give to a waitress: if the service rendered is deemed adequate, a tip can be offered.

You see, underlying these wrong-minded approaches to stewardship is the belief that I am the lord of my life and that God has precious little to do with things. Everything I have—time, talent and money—belongs to me by right, and because I earned it, and because it is mine to dispose as I propose.

Authentic Christian stewardship is a bold confession of belief that God is God, that he is our Father, and that we are the work of his hands. *Be still, and know that I am God.* Man proposes, but God disposes. If I can't understand that God is God (and I am not!), then I will have an even harder time understanding the second dynamic of stewardship: that God is active in my life.

**C**onsider the one leper that returned to Jesus. He knew who the Lord of his life was—"Master, have mercy upon me"—but he also recognized what God has done in his life. He knew he was not made, or even made whole by his own power. He knew that he did not deserve healing. He knew that God had richly blessed him; that God had done something in his life.

Authentic Christian stewardship understands that God is alive and active as Lord of our lives, that God is for us, that he is doing his mighty works in us, both as individual Christians and as a parish. So I ask you, What has God done in your life? What is he doing now?

Think for a moment about the fact that you were created, called into existence out of nothing. If a sculptor gives a block of marble the gift of a fine shape, the shape is a gift, but the marble's existence is not—that is the marble's own. But nothing is our own because we were made from nothing. Our very existence is a gift from God.

Two years ago I shared with you the rather startling statistic that if you own a pair of shoes; if you have a change of clothes; if you have a roof over your head; if you know where your next meal is coming from—you are in the top 2% of the world's population when it comes to wealth. As the Psalmist (Ps 66) says, "Come now and see the works of God, how wonderful he is in his doing ..." Everyone in this room is gifted with more wealth than 98% of your fellow human beings.

After you begin to understand that God is the Lord of your life, that he is living and active, your pride will melt away; you will find that all that all that we are accustomed to call ours is really his. Six out of ten doctors may agree on something, but ten out of ten saints agree, the closer you get to the greatness of God, the more you shrink in size. "He must increase, and I must decrease," says John the Baptist about Jesus.

But paradoxically, in acknowledging God as lord, in realizing that he is active in your life, you realize that you are in fact *everything*—you are his special gift, his beloved child in whom he is well pleased. Through Jesus you are one of God's chosen race, a royal priesthood, citizens of a holy nation (1 Peter 2:9-10).

**L**earn from the leper the third dynamic of stewardship: the only attitude we can adopt in response to the fact that God is God, that God is active in our lives, that God has given us everything is not indifference—"were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine?"—but thanksgiving. This brings us back to stewardship. Like the one leper falling at Jesus' feet in thanksgiving, stewardship is casting the trophies of ourselves, our souls, our bodies at his feet. Stewardship is worshipping God with our heart and soul and mind and strength. Stewardship is living in thanksgiving out in our lives by offering back to God our time, talent and money, glorifying God with our whole self and substance.

As the Prayer for the Whole State in the Rite I Mass (BCP, p. 329) puts it,

*Open, O Lord, the eyes of all people to behold thy gracious hand in all thy works, that rejoicing in thy whole creation, they may honor thee with their substance, and be faithful stewards of thy bounty.*

Or to put it more succinctly, *stewardship is my thanksgiving to God for all he has done, and is doing in my life.*

Our giving back to God *through* his Church is about talking the talk and walking the walk; it is about living with our lives what we confess with our lips: that God is Lord of every aspect of our lives. Stewardship is about us prayerfully discerning God's action in our lives. Stewardship is about being thankful for all that God has done, and will continue to do for us all the days of our life. Stewardship is a dynamic spiritual process.

Who is God? God is Lord.

What is God doing? He is active, and doing wonderful things for you—you have only to open your eyes and see.

What do you offer him in response? Thanksgiving.

“One of them, when he saw that he was healed ... fell on his face at Jesus feet, giving him thanks.” Generosity of time, talent and treasure is my thanksgiving for all God has done, and is doing in my life.