

October 7, 2018

God's Gifts – Our Gratitude

Prayer

May the words of my mouth be meditations of our hearts and be always acceptable unto Thee. O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Sermon

Each year about this time the clergy of the Episcopal church are charged to speak about stewardship. And to have a stewardship program for the congregation. The fact that the readings today contained a line, "You speak as any foolish woman would." And about divorce, has nothing to do with my decision to make today the stewardship sermon. Maybe a little bit. This is the stewardship sermon. You weren't warned about that because we wanted you to show up.

So many times, members of the church hear stewardship and immediately they think, "Oh here we go again." The church is talking about money. They're going to want us to make a pledge to the church for next year. And you're only half wrong. We're not really talking about money, but we are going to ask you to pledge next year.

But stewardship is so much more than that. Christian stewardship. Stewardship is not a word that we use very often outside of the church anymore. Stewardship used to be where one person was charged with taking care of the resources of someone else. It was because they could afford to hire somebody to do that. And it was because they were good at it. A good steward would ensure that the resources that belonged to the owner brought more resources to the owner. Brought more honor to the owner. And in the case of Christian stewardship, it is about us

being called to be stewards. And using the resources that God has given us to bring honor and glory to God. That's it. Simply put.

But we've lost our idea and understanding of what Christian stewardship is because we have confused it with fundraising. True stewardship, Christian stewardship comes from an understanding of a relationship with God. It comes from an understanding of knowing God to be creator. That all we are and that all we have is gift and blessing from God. That's where it begins. To understand and recognize that truth for ourselves. To be able to see God as one who loves so much and so dearly that he gives to us great gifts and talents to use in the living of our lives. So that we might have life, we might have it joyfully, and we might have it abundantly.

We hear that in the scriptures. Once we have come to know and understand that that is God's intent for us. That should lead us to that place of thanksgiving, gratitude for all that God has done. For all that God continues to do. It's a recognition that not only did God create. But when humanity had fallen away from God, God reaches out to us. To call us to be in relationship. A relationship based on love not on servitude. A relationship that brings us not only into a relationship with God but brings us into a different kind of relationship with one another.

When Jesus comes into the world, humanity and divinity together. It is God's act to come and embrace humanity. It is God's act to come and to share with us you are the beloved. Son or daughter, you are the beloved. You mean so much to me that I take upon your humanity so that I might redeem it. So that I might make it more than it had ever been. To be reconciled to God and in being reconciled to God to have the capacity to love enough. And to not fear enough, so that you could be in a good relationship, a healthy relationship, a loving relationship with one another.

It is an invitation to come and be a part of the kingdom of God. A kingdom that goes beyond the boundaries of the earth. Beyond the boundaries of humanity. It's about creating a kingdom, a community, where God is recognized as giver and gift. Where people are recognized not as the enemy but brothers and sisters. It's about being in the world but not of the world. And knowing that as we live out our lives, we are preparing for that life beyond that brings us into a more perfect unity with God and with one another. That's what the church is about. That's what Jesus was creating. That's what we are a part of now.

And I suspect that you are here on this beautiful sunny day, not because you didn't have anything better to do. But because you have recognized what God has done for you. God has given you life. God has blessed you with many things. Gifts and talents. To make your way in the world. You have heard a gospel message. A message that the Creator and Sustainer of Life loves you. Loves you. And you have been invited by the son of God to be a part of the community called the church.

Now there are many different forms that the church has taken throughout the millennia. There are many options of how you might want to pray and worship and gather together with certain individuals known as the church, called the church. You've chosen to be here. And we're grateful that you're here. But you're here because this community offers something. An understanding of what it is to be loved by God. An understanding of what it is to be supported by others who believe the same way. Who recognize the love of God. Who recognize the blessings that they have received. And what God desires for all people. To know that they are beloved sons and daughters of God. Which makes us brothers and sisters in God.

The church is that touching point where people who have not heard or have not been able to hear the gospel message in such a way that it touches their lives. That it draws them into accepting that invitation to be a part of God's kingdom. This is the place where that happens. People may go from congregation to congregation listening for that invitation. Listening for that trueness of message that says you are loved. And you are accepted. And you are God's child. And you are brother and sister in this congregation. That's what it is to be the church.

And I would like to say that God so blesses the church. Each church. Each congregation that you don't have to ask for money. God will provide the money. For a building, for a musician, for an office administrator, okay for a priest. For a youth minister. But the fact of the matter is, that God calls on us to provide for those things, not just for ourselves. We're not part of a club that says we are here, and we give dues so that we can take care of ourselves.

We are a church that is here for those who have not yet heard. Who are still living a broken life. That voice that says here you are accepted. Here you can find the beginning of wholeness. Here you can be in communion with one another and with God. Here you can continue to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. So that we can become stronger in our faith. So that we become stronger in our lives and in our relationship with God and with one another. It is to ensure that there is that voice in this community. A voice that some need to hear. Some want to hear.

And so, every year, we try to say something profound about stewardship that touches the heart because the fact of the matter is, we will be sending you a letter. Doug Smith is the chair of the stewardship committee. He's written a letter. We'll be sending that out this week. It will have a pledge card in it.

Let me say a little about what pledge cards are and what they are not. Pledge cards are a means to have an idea of how to put a budget together for next year. Pledge cards are a way for you to see at least an outline of where the money that you give goes. Pledge cards is a way to maintain contact and to tell you what our records show. So, we can share that with you, just so the records match. Pledge card is not an absolute. You're not signing a mortgage on your house. That if you don't pay it, someone is going call you and remind you that you are behind. A pledge card is not an absolute. It is your offering. What God has led you to want to give to the church. If life changes occur in your life, you're not going to have somebody knocking on your door saying, "Where's the money?"

It's about providing this place. It's about providing for this community. It's about providing that touch point in the community where people can come and hear and believe. To continue to grow in faith. To have that point of hearing for the first time that you are a beloved child of God. And in your relationship with God and in your relationship with one another you will find a wholeness in the living of life that you have not known before. It's about being part of a community that provides that for the greater community.

You'll be receiving that letter probably this week. Couple of things, please read it. He worked very hard on it, so read it. Something that you'll see contained in the letter is part of a sermon I preached a few years back about four things that we do as part of our stewardship of life, of ourselves. One is to pray for 20 minutes a day. Pray about your pledge to the church or what you choose to give to the church. It's about having an hour of worship every week. By coming here you've got that square filled. But there are other ways to worship as well. It's kind of like the speed limit. It's the minimum. Trust me, people in

Florida believe that. Speed limit is a minimum. An hour is a minimum. Okay.

To give of your time through the church or through so many other outreach programs in our community five hours during a month. The last thing on that list, fourth thing, is to give of your resources. Only you know that plus let me allay any fears that you might have. I don't look at pledge cards. I don't look at anybody's pledge cards except my own. I don't know, and I want to say I don't really care what you give. But it's not for me. It's for you. It's an expression of gratitude. It's an expression of your relationship with God. And it's an expression of your relationship with what this church is for you.

So, please read the letter. Please take some time to pray about it and use that as part of your 20 minutes one day. And on the 21st of October, two weeks from today. We'll ask you to please turn those in, bring them in. And then all will be done. It will be as painless as we can possibly make it. But remember it comes from gratitude and it comes from your relationship with God.

Gregory Hein – Rector

Renee' Evans – Transcriptionist