

Reflection on Stewardship Message to Congregation Oct. 21, 2007

Good Morning,

My name is Dennis Marks and I am speaking on behalf of your Vestry and Stewardship Committee – actually on behalf of you and I as Christ Church - to kick off this year's stewardship campaign, called "Rejoicing in the Light!"

I have a \$1,000 talk that lasts 15 minutes, a \$700 dollar message that lasts 20 minutes, and a \$100 dollar speech that lasts an hour. We will now take up a collection to see which one you get. Just kidding. I'll give you the \$700 dollar one for free.

Before I continue, I have to tell you two things. There is nothing that consoles a nervous, infrequent public speaker like knowing the audience is full of forgiving Christians, and the spooky thing. When I learned that the campaign was called "Rejoicing in the Light!" it raised the hairs on the back of my neck. This will only make sense when I'm through, so remember, that while I did add, "Rejoicing in the Light!" I actually wrote the ending several days before I learned that the theme was "Rejoicing in the Light!" That's the spooky thing.

Let us first thank God for our lives and for the many at Christ Church who have shared their lives to our benefit. We are only here today because many people have given their time, talent, and treasure over the last 29 years. There is great investment here.

When writing this I prayed that I would only share God's word, but I was reminded of the preacher's son who saw his father writing a sermon and asked, where do your ideas come from? The preacher smiled and said "from God." His son looked at the paper and asked, "Then why are so many things crossed out?"

You know I am going to talk about money, but to get into that now would be like hitching the horses behind the cart. I want to begin with the two most basic components of our lives, Attitude and Action, both fundamentally about our relationships with God and neighbor.

In my own struggle to find a balance between them, I have found that attitude without action is like a lonely house of cards, untested by the winds of the world, frightened by every little imagined breeze of difference, and that action without attitude is a never finished house built on sand, every shifting grain causing another flurry of business, frightened by every small earthquake of inactivity.

Attitude is our internal complex mental, spiritual, and emotional orientation to the world. I didn't say faith because talking about attitude is easier than talking about faith.
Everybody's got attitude.

To speak about faith means getting into stuff like Paul Tillich's "ultimate ground of being" and Martin Buber's "I Thou," but that would make everybody sleepy and I want your full attention when I get to the money part.

Let me just say that faith is the beating heart of attitude. It lies hidden in the mysterious fog deep within each of us where the essential nature of selfness and Godness discover one another in struggle and in play. Hidden but not out of reach. In prayer, meditation, and sometimes in the ordinary, we can dampen the normal noise of our lives, what our Buddhist friends call the monkey mind, and experience a stillness where the empty mind simply witnesses. Be still and know that I am God. Out of that encounter with the One comes our basic attitude toward self and other human beings. We live in the joy of loving God, and neighbor as self, or walk in fear and anxiety without it.

This is no all or nothing however. Our feeling of living in that love naturally comes and goes. Life presents great heights and deep valleys, but if our basic attitude is life in Christ, as Paul says, in that three-part love, in the faith heart beating in the fog of stillness, we will not be so puffed up by the heights or so shaken by the valleys that we let go of God's hand for very long.

However, we can shape our attitudes by decision, devotion, desire, and discipline. By direct dialogue within, about our self, and in honest communication with others. Too often, out of fear or lack of knowledge, we avoid that effort by engaging in indirect dialogue, allowing what we think others think about us to mold our attitude, or by simply hiding in a culturally approved meaningless stream of babble. Then, instead of entertaining the world, we let and even want the world to entertain us.

Therefore, an essential part of our attitude is "I am the one." At first that sounds wrong to a people that try to live God centered lives ultimately based on the Jewish prayer, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." In the commandments to love God and neighbor as self, Who is loving God? I am the one. Who is loving my neighbor? I am the one. Who will receive God's love for me, His acceptance of me as a unique member of the Kingdom? I am the one. A comprehensive response that claims relationship and participates in the mystery of the Eucharist. I am the one.

The Taoists say that for every three people you meet, at least one is your teacher. From many of you here I have learned that living in love leads to joy over despair, respect not suspicion, openness rather than closed, thankfulness outweighing bitterness, encouragement instead of judgment, sharing not guarding, and giving without thought of return. It also leads to hope, looking to the future rather than looking back to the past in nostalgia for some imagined better time or caught up in some former grievance of self or other.

We experience tough times in life and we certainly have as a church. In both, things were done and said that may be impossible to forget, but in a spirit of loving forgiveness, as Rabbi Milton Steinberg says, we must look to understand the causes, nature, and effects of our acts and those of others so that we are not crushed under the weight of an unenlightened consciousness, and are able to go forward with good cheer and confidence.

Let us be a church of good cheer and confidence. Let us be a people of hope. Not a wishful, handwringing hope, waiting like a powerless victim for some one to save us, but a hope sweaty with effort, driven by creative energy, grounded in the faith that the savior has already come.

No matter what you are, or think you are, as Bob Dylan sorta sings, “you’re gonna have to serve somebody.” Jesus says, “You can’t serve God and mammon.” The heart of Mammon is not money; it is the values of a strictly material world, ego driven values. Jesus said you can’t serve both, but what are we to do since we live in a material world. You don’t get food, drink, cars, retirement, vacations, colleges, homes, and churches by attitude alone. And if you don’t get them, you can’t share them.

Jesus also said to give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s. What does that mean alongside “you can’t serve both?” Bob Marley, the famous Rastafarian reggae singer, was once asked if he wasn’t being hypocritical by accepting so much money from record sales, taking the fruits of Babylon so to speak. Bob replied, “Babylon aint got no fruits.”

Marley echoed the meaning of Jesus: We must engage the material world with hard work and effort to receive the bounty essentially given to us as a gift from God, but always remembering that true fruits come from the attitude and actions of loving God, and neighbor as self. There will be difficulties because honest and thoughtful people do disagree, but Jesus is telling us to always keep God’s commandments at the center. We must even see our disagreements about what those commandments mean as a common struggle to understand God and this life, rather than being right and proving others wrong. The ultimate tool of the leaders of Caesar’s world is to convince each of us, as individuals, churches, tribes, or nations, that we are the only one, and to pit us against one another in unnecessary, endless and often violent battles between every imaginable variation of “us” versus “them.”

In summary, is our attitude one of love, freedom, the equality of all and thankful joy, or one of acquisition and servitude to mammon, fearfulness, and the ranking of other humans beings for what they can do for you or to you? To paraphrase the Bible, what you most love shows where your heart is and where your heart is determines how you spend your treasure. Attitude, with its heart of faith, is what drives the kind of actions you take.

Some of you are probably thinking *why he didn’t just say so 10 minutes ago*. Because after today, I may never get invited to speak again and I wanted to get it all out!

A minister told his congregation, "Next week I plan to preach about the sin of lying. To help you understand my sermon, I want you all to read Mark 17." The following Sunday the minister asked for a show of hands of those who had read Mark 17. Many hands went up. The minister smiled and said, "Mark has only sixteen chapters. I will now proceed with my sermon on the sin of lying." We can lie to ourselves about our attitude, but our actions will always show us and others what truly lies beneath.

Action is your intentional acts to take care of the world given and entrusted to you, and that includes the part of the world called Christ Church. It is using your body to do the physical work needed in your own life and all the communities you are part of, including Christ Church. It is taking the risk of offering your own gifts and skills, rather than letting them atrophy into sad dust gatherers on the shelf of "I would have if I hadn't been afraid." It is giving a time of your life in service rather than letting the world serve you. It is giving your money in love to that which you love, despite those nagging fears you might not have enough. It is stewardship.

But what are we to do when we just don't feel God's presence in our lives? The recent revelations about Mother Teresa show us that perseverance in the works of God even when you don't feel God that closely is a loving act. Love is not an emotion; it is the devotion, desire, discipline, and decision I mentioned a minute ago.

The point is that once you know what God wants, you don't need constant supervision. Remember, God is eternally present and it is for us to reach out for the God that emerges from the fog, not the God of our expectations.

Since this is about stewardship, many of you are wondering when I'll really get to the money part. As Father Joe might have said, we are at the denouement.

Most of us get uncomfortable when speaking about the money part, as if money and God are two very separate and incompatible poles. Discomfort breeds humor, and stewardship is no exception.

A man was going for an evening stroll, when he heard terrified screams coming from a house nearby. He ran up the steps to find a frantic mother whose small boy was choking on a quarter. The man seized the child by its heels, thumped its chest, and out popped the coin. The grateful mother said, "You certainly knew what to do, are you a doctor?" "No, M'am," said the stranger, "I'm a church treasurer."

The preacher announced one Sunday: Unfortunately, we need to replace the roof without delay and it will cost \$50,000 dollars. The good news is that we've got plenty of money. The bad news is that up to now, the money's in your pockets.

When the disciples were called to walk with Jesus, there is no record of any of them stopping to work to provide for their needs, and the families left behind had to fend for themselves. By giving sweat equity and monetary gifts, someone helped support those families, just as someone supported Jesus and his followers, making it possible for him to spread his message that the kingdom of God was at hand. Someone bought the bread and wine for the first supper and the last. Someone gave money to establish the first church and someone continued to do so for the next two millennia, right down to the someones of this church.

Did all those someones believe the old adage that if you give one you get back three? If you think about dollars, maybe, maybe not, but to limit it to dollars is to miss the point that a generous heart fosters a receptive eye that sees far more incoming goodies than go out.

Hear about the bumper sticker that says, "Tithe if you love Jesus, anyone can honk!" The traditional Tithe to aim for is 10%. Most of us first think, wow, that's a lot, but I wish Caesar only took 10%. Overall, most of us pay the various Caesars up to 30% or more. Fortunately, you only have to deal with your own conscience regarding how much you give for God's work, but if you don't give to Caesar, you will hear things like, "will the jury please be seated..."

Over the next few weeks, please listen to the stewardship witness you will hear from your brothers and sisters in Christ. Listen to their own encounters with God in the fog and what Christ Church means to them. Let them touch, teach, and guide you.

Intention Sunday is November 18th. That's when each of us can be a someone and pledge to Christ Church for next year, giving, as the Marxists say, each according to their means. I pray that a generous and thankful heart will make you dig deep into your pocket and startle the lint wide-awake. You will be making an investment in a better life for yourself and every one here now, for the children that gather around Nancy each Sunday, and for those souls yet unknown who will enter through these doors seeking and needing God's house. I urge you to make a financial commitment to the future of Christ Church as we move forward to find a permanent Rector and continue to build up our part of the body of Christ.

Now
please close your eyes
relax, let your shoulders drop
release the tension
breathe naturally and easily
letting any thoughts just slip away
just sitting and breathing quietly in God's house
joining together in a moment of stillness

Imagine the radiance of God glowing like an ember in your heart,
Let there be light
Any color you want
Love comes in all colors
A ball of light getting larger and larger
Now filling your heart with warmth
flushing your heart with new life
Getting brighter and brighter
Expanding to fill your whole body
Now too brilliant and intense to contain
it beams out of you like the rays of the sun
Each one a child of light among children of light
Shinning from all to all
illuminating the world in attitude and action,
facing the gift of God's world with arms wide open,
one embracing the mysterious loving God,
the other reaching to embrace all our neighbors in love
a whole church
living and giving thankfully
a shinning church
full of people of good cheer and confidence
full of people of hope
Rejoicing in the Light!

Amen