

All Saints Sunday/Stewardship

Matthew 5:1-12

5 November 2017

Christ Church

It may take enlightenment, or Heaven, or the totality of Holiness to understand the full meaning of the Beatitudes. “Blessed are the poor, the meek, the persecuted, them that mourn” – what is the blessing in that? From a worldly view, these make no sense to us. And yet, Jesus turns the worldly view upside down – what seems to be the advantage can be a spiritual impediment to us; and what appears the impediment may be the strength.

It takes a lifetime to even begin to understand this mystery; for me, it is an on-going learning which began at my Baptism. And, this morning, as we baptize these new little ones, we are opening the door to learning for them and their families to seek the deeper view of things.

Today I am to share with you my stewardship story. And, because it is a long story, (requiring at least two hours and a bottle of wine), I have tweaked it as best I can to share with you the mystery of what is an on-going transformation in Christ.

My stewardship lessons began on our family farm. Along with my siblings, I participated in feeding chickens, gathering eggs, watering the garden, picking butterbeans – whatever the task of the week or season; and for that service, I received a dollar a week which was given to me in quarters. Three of the quarters were for my personal use (well, one was supposed to go in my Christmas Savings account at the bank) and the fourth quarter went into the envelope that I put in the collection basket each Sunday.

So, from the time I was five until I was about fourteen, without knowing it, I was tithing 25% of my income to the church each week! Not a bad start, but that commitment was short lived. As I arrived at adolescence, my dedication to tithing came to a screeching halt.

Like many teens, I was self-absorbed. My siblings had left home; my Dad had stopped raising chickens; and the garden became his and my mother’s

domain. My interest drifted away from chores and shifted toward basketball, field hockey, tennis, soft ball, piano, glee club, dating, the school newspaper. It never occurred to me during those years that I could be of service to others.

Some of the girls in my high school volunteered at an after-school program run by the Little Sisters of the Poor. My only association with the Little Sisters of the Poor came from my brother Nick who would complain that the University of Virginia football team was so bad that they couldn't even beat the Little Sisters of the Poor.

I think back on those in my high school who were dedicated to helping children whose parents were unable to be there for them. Where was I then? I was self-absorbed. I wasn't taught anything about giving of time, talent, or treasure for a higher good. My money was spent on clothes, make-up, and candy.

As a young adult, intent on keeping up with my upwardly mobile siblings – motivated to be admired and accepted by them – I spent income in purchasing those things that I hoped would impress. But, among those I sought to impress, it didn't work. In fact, it created competition rather than loving cooperation.

My world view would change dramatically when, in the labor and delivery room of Piedmont Hospital, I heard my son's first cry. I remember gasping and thinking, "There is a God:" thus began my journey to spiritual adulthood.

David and I had attended both the Methodist and Catholic Church and put money in the collection plate. But, because David and I now had a child to raise, we decided to join a parish – St. John Neuman in Lilburn close to where we were living. I had never officially joined a parish before – always attending those of my parents. After Mass one Sunday, we filled out a registration card and five days later church envelopes showed up in the mail.

David and I, accustomed to the warmth of the Methodist Church of his youth, were stunned by this "welcome." We did not receive a call, a letter of welcome, or anything – just church envelopes. I was mad. I complained to my neighbor across the street, a devout Catholic and adult education leader at St. John's. A few days after that, I received a phone call from the pastor, Fr. Paul Reynolds, who invited me to come in for a chat.

This was a watershed moment in my spiritual life. I came into his office loaded for bear. I griped about getting envelopes and no welcome; I griped about all the other aspects of the Catholic Church that made me mad. I fully expected him to admonish me and offer to hear my confession. Instead, he replied, "Ceci, for every complaint you have, I could add six more."

I was not expecting this. He then said, go home and throw those envelopes in the trash and don't worry about giving money to the church. Of all the things that Fr. Paul could have said to me, this was the most liberating and kind-hearted. He demonstrated that which he preached each Sunday: the unconditional love of God in Christ. This was new to me and it was life-changing.

And, instead of ditching the envelopes, Dave and I began to put money in them each week. We felt good about this. Well, I felt good about this until one week-end when my neighbor was going out of town and asked me to feed her cat and put her church envelope in the collection plate on Sunday.

When I picked up the envelope, the amount of her pledge was written on the outside. I couldn't believe how much money she was giving to the Church. I thought it outlandish and impossible. But, the amount in that envelope began to haunt me. I tamped it down.

Eventually, we arrived at St. Bede's Episcopal Church. We joined the choir, taught Sunday School, led a Youth Group, I was a lay reader and Eucharistic minister. With our many duties, two children, and one income, we pledged a modest amount to the parish – that is – until St. Bede's began a capital campaign and we were asked to pledge a significant amount. Neither David nor I felt confident about this, but we decided to do it in good faith. By God's grace, we were able to fulfill that promise.

It was during seminary, a major financial stretch made possible by David's willingness to make sacrifices on behalf of my vocation, that I went to a stewardship workshop given by Deacon Charles Gearing. In this seminar, Charlie drew three concentric circles. On the outside of the circles are all those who have no affiliation with church. In the first outer ring are those who come at Christmas and Easter. In the next circle within are those who participate in the sacramental life of the church and make a regular, financial contribution. In

the inner circle, are the disciples – those who have given their lives over to God and who are dedicating their lives in service to Christ.

I knew when I saw those circles that, as a priest, it would not be enough to give to the church out of convenience – out of a sense of duty – a have-to. I knew that if I was going to be worth anything as a priest, I would need to make the next big step – a tithe. It didn't happen right away. It took a few years, in fact. And, the more that we are able to make that commitment, the deeper the faith and assurance of being a part of the Mystery that we call the Body of Christ.

As your rector, I see so much possibility for Christ Church. We have many gifts and bountiful resources. At the same time, there is a great need. There is always great need. But I am thinking particularly about the cost to give our children and youth the foundation which can sustain them throughout their lives. I'm thinking about our dedicated staff who haven't had a raise in years. I'm thinking about the possibilities for our Hispanic community, our outreach ministries, and things to which God is calling into our future.

All that we have and all that we are find their source in the generosity of God. God who blesses the poor, the meek, the grieving, the peace-makers. In the next two minutes, let us observe in silence the ways that God blesses us; and ponder how we might respond to this great love.

