

Pastor Frank Espegren

Sermon for Pentecost 18 – Feast of St. Francis – Stewardship 1 – October 4, 2020

Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46 – “Prioritization”

Grace and peace to you this 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of our Stewardship season (and Feast Day of St. Francis) from God our loving parent and from the One who remakes the substance, and reprioritizes the convictions, of our lives, Jesus Christ, our Savior & Lord. Amen. Stewardship is a big and largely unused word in our culture that I’ve been trying to unpack as a pastor for years. When we use the word stewardship, we are actually talking about many things: money and how we choose to hold and distribute it in our lives, environmentalism and the care of creation, and the adoption of the slow-to-dawn-on-us character trait of long-sighted wisdom and generosity over short-term and self-centered gain.

There are stories in the Gospels Jesus tells about how stewards behave. And today’s Gospel is not really considered one of them. But this terrible tale of selfish ambition to the point of violence is meant to be a wake-up call. There are all kinds of stewardship questions arising out of it. How are we to grasp what we have? How do we understand our place? How do we receive, distribute and release what is placed in our grasp? Can we follow God rather than the small letter “g” god of self-interest and greed? Can we see our lives and our faith not as private things, but deeply connected to the whole, entwined in each other,

lived out before God and neighbor? Can the internal components of our faith (prayer, self-examination, study and commitment), lead us to our true lives, our corporate, “public,” lives - that we are better off acknowledging, living and sharing with all kinds of people, from all kinds of backgrounds, with all kinds of experiences, and with all kinds of “leanings.” And that as the church, although immensely diverse and different thinking and abled people, we are One because of one thing – our commitment to be formed and follow Jesus Christ – to be a “disciple.” That is our bond – and it cannot be lived out except in community.

So here we are in the first week of Stewardship, aiming for 2021 General Fund pledges to be received on Commitment Sunday two weeks from now, on October 18<sup>th</sup>. I really can’t say enough about how important your pledge is, our pledges altogether are, for the ministry and mission of St. John’s this coming year. Allow me to briefly summarize what came our way in 2020: A pandemic that has limited our ability to gather in church, in school, in society, and for fun. Another day of racial reckoning because we were born in or came to a country that was birthed by an inspired and principled democratic (small “D”) ideal, but also into our country’s original sin of slavery that deeply embedded racism also as part of our national fabric that is ours to work on and work out to this day. Then there’s the remaking of

what church even means in a society that either ignores us or chides us for our hypocrisies and shortcomings. Our institutions, politics, cultural principles and priorities are in the process of being redefined, a hotly contested election is upon us, and here I am, the Senior Pastor of St. John's, asking you to care once again about how significantly you invest in St. John's, your church, and your faith home. And I am...I am asking you to do that very thing. We need you to prioritize St. John's in the economics of your household, many of which are already under significant stress because of health concerns, job loss, salary reductions, and competing priorities and needs. We fully acknowledge this.

But here's the deal, without 300 of you, individuals and family units, submitting a pledge, a generous offering based on your circumstances, and honoring it to the best of your ability, we cannot be the church in the way we hope to be in a city and State and country operating with such great strain. Without going all in, we cannot be "the light of the world, a city set on a hill that cannot be hid," as Jesus describes it earlier in Matthew's Gospel. Let me put it simply, 300 pledges from you (there is no other source), is the financial cornerstone of St. John's. It is how we don't come at you all year long with requests for funding. And primarily, it is how we can settle in to consider what it means that Jesus the Christ, born into history in Bethlehem, raised in Nazareth, who preached a new understanding of God and the possibilities for our

new life, who died on a cross, only to be raised by God on the third day, that this Jesus the Christ, is our savior and Lord, the One in whom we place our trust, and the example for how we best should live. That if there is a cost to discipleship, as the late, great, theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, and there is, it is worth paying, because it so completely pales in comparison to the cost Jesus paid on our behalf. Please, start to consider what your tithe, your offering, for 2021 should be, challenge yourself to be generous. My prayer is that your pledge reflect a life of received grace and thanksgiving – that you make your 2021 General Fund pledge part of your “Thank You” plan – to the life in Christ God has given you!

And now to St. Francis. I know we Protestants view the saints somewhat differently than our other brothers and sisters in the Christian faith, but there is no denying that we need examples of those living now, in addition to those who have gone before us, to show us what it looks like to live a faithful, Biblically-honest, Christo-centric life. And St. Francis of Assisi, who lived 800 years ago, is definitely such a life we should take into account, especially in our stewardship season that fundamentally asks how we are going to be in relationship with our God and this world God made and requests us to steward. For you see, Francis connected his Christian faith to the world in which he lived. Francis cared for the people around him, especially those who were

poor and the sick. Francis understood his human connection to the natural world God created. He preached to birds, praised all creatures as if they were brothers and sisters in Christ. Francis helps us to see that our Care of Creation, which we often give over to the world of science, or the world of politics, is for us not only both of those things, but also, and fundamentally a matter of faith. Our care of creation is a theological reflection of what it means to follow Jesus and join God in caring for this world God loves so much!

Fundamentally, stewardship is understanding that we are all connected, not separated by, our money, our resources, our gifts, and our challenges. A life of stewardship understands that our lives lived on land, supported by water, and dependent on a climate that holds us all in life, is fundamentally a matter of faith. The life given back to me by the sacrifice of Jesus, is to be lived freely and fully, not for myself, but in praise of God and love of neighbor. How I live cannot be taken out of the context of God's creation and love of all people and creatures and things. A life as God's good stewards demands we ask every question, struggle with every issue, and bend our lives not towards self-interest, but what feeds us – a life of love, the gift of grace, the purpose of stewardship.

Stewardship means that we think about all of our lives as a whole: our financial lives (cheerfully willing to give of we have, what we've been given, for the work of the church and to aid those in need), our allegiant lives (asking, will your relationship with God be how you primarily view your life, see the world, and make your commitments), and our hope-filled and prayerful lives (knowing that we don't have to have it all figured out, but simply trust the one who creates and loves us and all things).

Today's Epistle lesson, from Paul's letter to the Philippians sums it up, quite nicely: you see, everything Paul believed gave him the advantage, all of the privilege he held, all his societal admiration and cultural credibility – when juxtaposed with God's grace and calling, well, I'll use Paul's word, it was all "rubbish." For, and I quote Paul directly here, "whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ." For Paul, the first real explainer of the faith, Jesus became bigger and more important than everything else! May you become a good servant and a good steward, welcoming the One who comes to save, making to Him the commitment of your life, and receiving the true understanding that you are constantly being showered with God's grace and love!

A prayer attributed to St. Francis (actually written much later than that, but no matter) is a perfect ending to a stewardship sermon. For you see, stewardship isn't really about money. It's about you, and your life being good and right. Stewardship is an all of your life decision. Let us pray:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love  
Where there is injury, pardon  
Where there is doubt, faith  
Where there is despair, hope  
Where there is darkness, light  
And where there is sadness, joy

O Divine Master, grant that I may  
Not so much seek to be consoled as to console  
To be understood, as to understand  
To be loved, as to love  
For it is in giving that we receive  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned  
And it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life  
Amen