

## The Big Money Question

*The Rev. Bernard J. Owens/Homily for September 10, 2017*

It's remarkable how often values that are not our own can creep their way in, to such an extent that what we come to regard them as sacrosanct even though they may be contrary to who we actually are. This happens when we set aside what Jesus tells us is truly valuable and instead let the world determine what's important. So, I thought I'd start this morning with a return to some of those core values, and to do so by sharing my job description with you.

Well, it's not my whole job description but it is the part about Christian stewardship. This is from our Constitutions and Canons:

*It shall be the duty of Rectors or Priests-in-Charge to ensure that all persons in their charge are instructed concerning Christian stewardship, including:*

- (i) reverence for the creation and the right use of God's gifts;*
- (ii) generous and consistent offering of time, talent, and treasure for the mission and ministry of the Church at home and abroad;*
- (iii) the biblical standard of the tithe for financial stewardship; and*
- (iv) the responsibility of all persons to make a will as prescribed in the Book of Common Prayer.<sup>1</sup>*

Sounds pretty exciting, doesn't it? Even though we're not going to get to all that today, I wanted you to hear how many layers there are to Christian stewardship: caring for the environment, giving of our time and money, the biblical standard of the tithe, and the responsibility of everyone to prepare a will. Yes, all this is about money and about caring for the church that we love, but at its heart each one of these is about how we care for our world and for one another. It's about the care of our souls.

Now, over time we rectors have interpreted this charge rather...narrowly... sticking to the letter of the law and mentioning money...once, maybe twice a year, but not much beyond that. It just wouldn't be...polite. But Jesus has something to say about money that is not polite: we must talk about it, because when left hidden money stands in the way of our relationship with God.

Yet how often will each of us hear the exact opposite, the messages instead that the world wants us to hear about wealth and consumption? Once, maybe twice, maybe six times in a given commercial break. Once, maybe twice, maybe six times when we check our status on social media. Once, maybe twice, maybe 100

times a day when we worry about how much money we have today and how much we will have tomorrow.

But that's not what Jesus taught us. No, Jesus seized upon every opportunity he could to talk about money. Jesus talked about money more than anything else other than the Kingdom of God. He did this because he knew two things about it. One, he knew that when money holds power over us, we remain enslaved to it. Yet he also knew that in opening our hearts around money, and even healing our relationship with it *by giving it away*, we would find a path to discipleship.

Stories of discipleship always have two components to them. There is a leaving, and a following. Each of Jesus' disciples had something they had to walk away from in order to follow him. Peter, Andrew, James and John all left their fishing nets to follow Jesus.<sup>ii</sup> Francis and Nicholas were both fabulously wealthy young men who left their riches – Francis literally stripping his sumptuous clothes in the sight of his family – to follow their Lord.

We, too, must leave something in order to be disciples. If we're to follow Jesus, we have to be ready to leave something that seems, well, *unleavable*.

A wealthy young man asks him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Though we might be tempted to interpret that question simply as "how do make it to heaven" I believe that a more whole-hearted reading of this would be something more like: "Teacher, how can I have this change of heart?"

When Jesus answers, sell your possessions, give the money to the poor, and follow me, the young man is heartbroken. Eternal life sounds great, but he can't imagine that the eternal is now. He thinks he wants to *follow*, but he cannot leave what holds him at the starting line, what keeps him stuck.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy here is that his heart brings him to Jesus, but then his wallet holds him back. "It is touching," says Charles R. Lane, "because Jesus obviously want him to be a disciple."<sup>iii</sup> Yet his wealth told him something different: it told him that without money, he was nothing. And he listened.

And in our world, we listen. The subtext here is that the wealthier we are, the harder it is to follow Jesus. St. Basil wrote in the 4<sup>th</sup> century that the more money we have, the harder it is to love our neighbor.<sup>iv</sup> We are the wealthiest society in human history, and yet we think that we have got faith and money in proper balance.

But think for a moment how many wealth-and consumption messages we expect, allow, permit in a given year. Literally thousands upon thousands. How many generosity and stewardship messages do we tolerate in that same year? One,

maybe two. We do *not* have money in faith in proper balance, because we cannot serve God and wealth. Once we get into the game of figuring out how much of what we have is God's and how much we can hold on to, we've already serving two masters.

And so stewardship has come to feel like an annual reminder to set some aside for God, rather than a celebration of all that God gives us and all the ways that we can respond. But I love talking about generosity, because it means reflecting on all that God does for us, and all the ways that we get to say thanks.

We've come to think that talking about money is about encouraging sacrificial giving. In a way, sure, that's what it is and as a matter of fact that kind of giving is good for us. But far more important is this: I want you to think about this a *transformational* giving. Transformational giving means leaving something that anchors us in a self-centered world, and instead following Jesus.

So...let's talk turkey. How much should you give? Not, how much does the church *need*...that's a question for another day. Today, this month, is all about you. The goal of our stewardship ministry has nothing to do with budgets and targeted goals, because we believe that this is about one thing: discipleship. Following Jesus.<sup>y</sup> So, what is the right amount to help you grow in your relationship with God?

That number is going to be different for every person, for every household, but scripture and tradition teach us that the number should be a meaningful proportion of our income, and grow over time. My first pledge when I was younger was about 4 or 5%. Jo and I have grown over the years to reach the tithe of 10%. We give that, off the top, because we know that everything we have is God's, and that frankly it gives us great joy.

Of course, many are at a different place in their journey, and that's ok. The point is to begin, and to grow, and to come to see all things as God's. The question is not, how do I give sacrificially, but rather, how do I give *transformationally*?

What level of giving will help you make a meaningful break with the priorities of the world, and allow you to truly follow Jesus?

And yet, despite all this talk about money, Jesus doesn't want your money. Jesus wants your heart. He just knows that for most of us, our hearts are weighed down with our treasure, and that nothing breaks that spell like giving it away. When we give, we become generative: The money we offer is just the beginning of what we then have to give. What starts with our financial giving becomes a snowball of generosity and grace that finds its way into every corner of our lives, and into the world around us.

The next two weeks are an important time in our life as a church. We will come together in five community gatherings to celebrate the church and God's gifts to us. No one will be asked for money, but it will be an important moment to build our church through fellowship and give thanks for what we have been given. I want you to pick one and attend it, but most importantly I want you to pray for St. Andrew's. Not for money, or that we raise a certain amount. Rather, I want these gatherings to be animated by the prayers of the whole church, and I invite you to pray that our hearts will be transformed by a call to generous thanksgiving.

May we continue to give thanks, and may we grow not just in generous giving, or even in sacrificial giving, but in transformational giving.

*Homily for September 10, The Rev. Bernard J. Owens, The 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, Proper 18 (& Matthew 9:16-22), St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Greensboro, North Carolina.*

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<sup>i</sup> Canon III.9.6(b)

<sup>ii</sup> Lane, Charles R. Ask, Thank, Tell: Improving Stewardship Ministry in Your Congregation. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006. P. 38

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid* p. 38

<sup>iv</sup> <http://alexis-florides.blogspot.com/2015/05/st-basil-on-wealth-and-social-justice.html>

<sup>v</sup> This thought, and much of this homily, is drawn from the work of Charles R. Lane in Ask, Thank, Tell. I recommend it to all pastors and those leading stewardship ministry. He often uses the phrase "The Goal of our stewardship ministry is to help God's people grow in their relationship with Jesus through the use of the time, talents, and finances God has entrusted to them."