

Stewardship Commitment Sunday: The Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Text: II Thessalonians 3:6-13

The Rev. Rich Simpson, November 14, 2010, St. Francis Church

Let us pray:

*As those of old, their first fruits brought of vineyard, flock and field,
to God, the giver of all good, the source of bounteous yield.
So we, today, our first fruits bring, the wealth of this good land,
of farm and market, shop and home, of mind and heart and hand.*

In 1992, I was the Protestant Campus Minister at Central Connecticut State University. Hathy was working at the University of Connecticut Health Center in Farmington, and had just begun a Masters in Public Health program at the same place. We were living on the second floor of a triple-decker house in New Britain with our first-born son, Graham, who turned two that fall. Honestly, it seems like only yesterday...

The ecumenical service at CCSU at which I presided was held on Sunday evenings at 7 p.m. That allowed us to worship together as a family on Sunday mornings. It turned out to be somewhat of a challenge, however, to find a congregation that felt like "home." We had both grown up with church as an important part of our lives, but since both The Hawley United Methodist Church and St. Anne's Episcopal Church in Lincoln were more than two hours away from New Britain (in opposite directions) we needed to find a congregation that we could both call home.

Like many people in their twenties, we wandered for a while until we eventually landed at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in New Britain. We liked both of the clergy there a lot. And once the people at St. Mark's discovered that I was ordained, they actually began to talk to us as well. St. Mark's had a sign on the doors of the nave as you left that said, "Our worship has ended, the service begins." And they meant it; they lived it out in their commitment to the needs of the urban poor and through a visible presence to people living with AIDS and HIV. The liturgy and music were pretty good and the preaching was decent. We were not seeking perfection, just authenticity; and we found it at St. Mark's. And after a while it really did begin to feel like we belonged there.

Most people readily grasp that ordained ministry is not the fastest path to getting rich in this world; there are many rewards, but wealth usually isn't one of them. But among ordained people, campus ministers tend to come about as close to taking a vow of poverty as Protestants ever get. Between the two of us, in 1992, our income was a little more than \$32,000. So we had this two-year old whom we hoped would one day get accepted into college and that somehow we'd be able to pay for it when he did. We started saving for that. We were both twenty-nine years old, and retirement seemed like a zillion years away. But we are also both oldest children (and rule followers) and somebody had told us that it was a good idea to start preparing for retirement when you are young! So we dutifully opened 403-B accounts and started saving for that, too. But we lived within our means and we were fine.

And then November 1992 rolled around. We were asked to make a financial pledge to support the mission and ministry of St. Mark's Church. It was the first time in our adult lives we had been asked to do this, because it was the first time in our adult lives that we had a church home where we weren't sitting next to our parents in worship or as visitors in a church. And so we talked about it and prayed and talked some more. And then, with more than a little bit of fear and trembling, we

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filled out a pledge card. I wish I could tell you that we made a pledge of \$3000 that year, ten percent of our adjusted gross income. We did not. I wish I could tell you that I'd learned in seminary about good stewardship and therefore I had no worries or concerns about money. I did not.

But what we knew was that we wanted to do more than we could do at the time and so we approached it in the same way we approached the idea of saving for college and retirement: we made a plan. We knew we didn't want to get surprised in November 1993 or 1994. We knew that we wanted to tithe and we knew we couldn't get there overnight. We also knew that the longest journey always begins with the first step. So we made a pledge that fall that, at the time, seemed like a lot of money to us. But more importantly, we made a plan to put ourselves on the path toward getting to a tithe over the course of the next five or six years.

Eighteen years have passed. Last month the Stewardship Committee asked the vestry and the clergy to pledge early, as they always do. The number that I wrote on our pledge card for 2011 was \$7500. What I want to tell you is this: it was not a big deal. That is not because our income is higher today than it was then, which of course it is. It was not a big deal because the hardest part of the journey for us was in the early 1990s. And once we made the decision that our giving to support the Church would be the first priority in our lives, it has gotten much easier.

Stanley Hauerwas, who teaches ethics at Duke University, likes to say: "don't tell me what you believe, just show me your checkbook. And then I'll tell you what you really believe." I believe that. I tell you this story today because I want you to know that even if I wasn't the rector here, I'd still be committed to tithing; because I believe that it is a good and joyful thing to support our spiritual home as a first priority in our lives. I tell you this story because sometimes people are surprised that clergy who are paid a salary by a parish also support the life and ministry of that parish. I like my job and I like getting a paycheck. But we pledge to the work of this congregation for precisely the same reasons that we pledged at St. Mark's: because we are a part of the life of this parish and because we believe in the work that this congregation is doing within these walls and beyond them. We believe in the ways that this congregation preaches the gospel at all times, sometimes even with words. And we are truly grateful for the ways that this parish has nurtured and shaped the faith of that two-year old boy and the brother that followed a year and a half later. St. Francis Church has nurtured the faith of Graham and James through church school, youth group, choir, and mission trips and we don't take that for granted.

I tell you this story because I want you to know that I would never ask from any of you what I am not trying to also do in my own life. I tell you this story because I hope you will hear echoes of your own story in it and ask yourself, if you are not yet where you hope to be, how you will have the difficult conversation that eventually makes it easier.

The meaning of today's Epistle reading is not immediately obvious. We begin to get a clearer picture, though, when we remember that it's a misnomer to say that Paul wrote this letter "to the Thessalonians." He didn't write to the *Thessalonica Daily News*. He didn't write to *all* Thessalonians. He wrote to the small house churches in Thessalonica—to the baptized community in what we know as modern-day Greece. He wrote these words just a couple of decades or so after the death and resurrection of Jesus. So let's be clear: he's not making a political argument to cut welfare and replace it with workfare. Nor is he suggesting that the Thessalonian congregation cut

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the church's mission budget to the poor because the poor are lazy and undeserving. Rather, Paul is speaking to the Church in Thessalonica, and reminding the members of that congregation that they need to share the workload, that ministry is a team sport. He is wrestling here with what was apparently a persistent problem in that congregation, because this is not the first time he has raised it. In First Thessalonians, Paul writes: "We urge you, beloved; admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them." (I Thessalonians 5:14) Apparently these admonishments and encouragements didn't work. Apparently there are still idlers and busybodies there.

You know those people: they are the ones who say things like, "it would be great if *somebody* in this church would do x..." Depending on how developed the person's sense of humor is, I sometimes respond by saying, "hey, you're somebody!" It's an old problem in the Church, dating back to those early decades of the Church's life in Thessalonica; and it hasn't yet gone away. In the reading we heard today, basically Paul says: "look EVERYONE needs to pitch in and help. NO ONE should be expecting a free ride here. Let's get to work!"

We first learn, for good and for ill, how to be members of a community in our families. Hopefully we learn that everyone has a role to play and a job to do. If you don't learn this at home, then hopefully you have a choir director or a basketball coach or a teacher who helps you to learn it somewhere along the way. In my experience, idlers create resentment and hurt feelings which break down community. When people leave their dirty dishes in the living room or on the kitchen counter because the dishwasher is full (but they never think to empty it if the dishes are clean, or run it if they are not) then resentment builds. They think "somebody" will clean up after them.

It is no different in a congregation. I can tell you that I have witnessed, on occasion, that *sometimes* people leave their dirty dishes in the sink here at St. Francis or on the tables in Fellowship Hall or in the library. It happens. And let me be very clear: Jesus died for them too. They, too, are beloved of God. But it doesn't mean they are easy to live with. Paul calls them idlers. My own experience as a pastor, however, tells me that these things don't always happen because people are lazy. Sometimes they are just clueless. Sometimes they really just don't know any better. The work of a congregation, whether in first-century Thessalonica or in twenty-first century Holden is to help people to grow into the full stature of Christ. If they don't know any better, they can learn, with God's help. If they are lazy, then they need to be admonished. If they are clueless then someone needs to take them aside and encourage them. But we need all hands on deck.

I think that these words we heard in today's epistle reading are really just the flip side of Paul's image of the Church as the Body of Christ. *We are living members of that Body*, Paul says elsewhere. He is reminding us that there is plenty of work to do and so no one should try to come along for a "free ride." We are called, each and every one of us, to give back. What does this text have to do with stewardship?

May those with eyes to see, see; and those with ears to hear, hear. Amen.