

November 22, 2015 ~ Christ the King

In the name of our loving, liberating, life giving God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

That opening is new. Normally I begin praying, "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our strength and our redeemer."

I borrowed this sermon prayer from our New Presiding Bishop, Bishop Michael Curry. If you haven't had a chance to hear him preach, you just missed it. Between services, in the parish hall, as sort of an impromptu Adult Forum, we viewed the sermon from his installation and had a chance for discussion.

But now I need to get this sermon started, because I have a big job to do today. Today is the Last Sunday of Pentecost; the Feast of Christ the King and, because next Sunday is the First week of Advent, as well as Stewardship Sunday, I thought this week would be best for preaching a homily on stewardship.

As luck would have it, I just recently re-read, *A Spirituality of Fundraising*, by the Dutch catholic priest, theologian and spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen. I have been attending Vestry, Finance and Endowment meetings; and I am aware of the financial burden my new position here places on our parish.

All of this got me thinking about stewardship and of how well I, or rather we, actually put Christ first and recognize Him as King and Lord of our lives when considering what we should give back in proportion to all that we have received. And, I say WE with a new understanding of stewardship as a team rather than an individual sport. Let me explain, and as I do, I will share with you some things I have learned from reading Nouwen.

I had always thought of stewardship in terms of my own individual responsibility and, most generally, in financial terms. I have always hated talking, or more specifically, asking for money, especially as a priest.

I remember setting where you are and listening to those talks. I was in high school and was invited to attend an evangelical church by a friend of mine; about five or six of us went. We heard a very powerful, emotional and scary sermon, really, about being ready for Jesus' return, which could happen at any time - maybe even tonight! Then, there was lots of singing and crying, and an altar call where people came forward to pray with and for one another. After that, there was some more singing; and then, during the announcements, we were told to remember, as the collection plate came by, that the church was purchasing a new organ. And not just any organ, this was a great organ, with a beautiful sound, one of the best ever made. It would out last all of us. It was built to last 150 years. At that point a friend of mine leaned over and said, "If Jesus is coming tomorrow... why do they need an organ that will last 150 years?"

A few weeks later, I was talking to my dad and said, "I think I will quit going to that church. All they ever talk about is money. My dad just looked at me and said, "Maybe if you guys would give him some, he wouldn't have to talk about it so much." So, yes, stewardship is an individual responsibility; my father made his point.

But it's deeper than that. It's ultimately our responsibility to and for each other. Stewardship, in the final analysis, is a team sport. Listen to something Nouwen says, adapted a little to shift the focus from fundraising to stewardship, he says,

"Stewardship is, first and foremost, a form of ministry. It is a way of announcing our vision and inviting other people into our mission. Stewardship is proclaiming what we believe in such a way that we offer other people an opportunity to participate with us in our vision and mission. Stewardship appeals are precisely the opposite of begging. When we seek to raise funds, we are not saying, 'Please, could you help us out because lately it's been hard.' Rather, we are declaring, 'We have a vision that is amazing and exciting.' We are inviting you to invest yourself through the resources that God has given you - your energy, your prayers, and your money - in this work to which God has called us."

Now, I don't know if it's true in most Episcopalian churches, and I certainly don't think it's true here, but from where I come from, it's almost a universal truth that about a third of the parishioners give financial support to the parish regularly and consistently. Another third give occasionally and sporadically; and there are usually about a third who give rarely, if ever, to the financial support of their parish.

While I thought about all of this, I recalled some haunting advice that Fr. Zosima gave in Dostoevsky's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*:

"There is only one salvation for you: take yourself up, and make yourself responsible for all the sins of men. For indeed it is so, my friend, and the moment you make yourself sincerely responsible for everything and everyone, you will see at once that it is really so, that it is you who are guilty on behalf of all and for all."

His point: perhaps if we, as Christians, had loved more, helped more, suffered more, given more, the criminal would never have resorted to crime or even felt the need to do so, no matter whatever they did to get in trouble. We are all guilty for each other.

Then, combining all these thoughts, I began to see the fact that so many, about two-thirds, give only occasionally, sporadically, rarely or not at all, might actually be primarily my own fault...

and an apt description, not of different types of people who go to church, but as different moments in my own life and the different ways I myself have responded to Christ my King and addressed, at times, the needs of the church...

And I began to see my stewardship responsibility in a whole new light.

Stewardship is not primarily about how much money I give. Because, by myself, I don't have enough to support the entire parish. In fact, in my position, I'm kind of hoping the parish has enough to entirely support me.

So, we do what we can, when we can. And we pray for one another, so, that when we can't do much or even anything at all, we know someone in the family will pick up the slack. Because we realize that in those moments when we couldn't or didn't or even wouldn't do much, someone was there to pick up the slack for us.

Stewardship is primarily about how well we support and participate in and communicate to others the amazing and exciting vision and mission of Trinity Episcopal Church. It's about how well we work together loving God with our whole heart, mind and soul, and our neighbor as ourselves.

If we can do better at that, invite and inspire others to do the same, then the financial support we need to realize our vision and to carry out our mission and to be the people and parish God is calling us to be, will take care of itself.

Let's us pray today for the grace to fully recognize Christ as our King, to truly love God and neighbor, and to do all we can to help build up God's Kingdom right here in Atchison ... and to always remember...

... ALL THINGS COME OF YOU O LORD,
AND OF YOUR OWN HAVE WE GIVEN YOU!

Amen.

