



[Back](#)

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## Given to be Given in Return

### Carpenter House

by **The Rt. Rev. Henry N. Parsley, Jr.**



A reflection by Bishop Parsley (Sept./Oct. 2009 Alabama Episcopalian)

*What we spent we had;  
What we kept we lost;  
What we gave we have.*  
—Ancient British epitaph

When I think of stewardship certain words come to mind: gratitude, commitment, loyalty, generosity, and giving. All these are aspects of our Christian belief that we are made to be stewards of the life that God has so graciously given us.



As important as these, but not so quick to come to mind, is the word abundance. All stewardship is rooted in the vision of God's unfailing abundance: the abundance of creation, the abundance of grace shown to us in Jesus Christ, the abundance of every moment of life in this magical world. This is the message of the cover photograph of this issue of The Alabama Episcopalian.

In our days of financial difficulty, it is easy to see scarcity around us rather than abundance. Many of us have "less" than we had last year, some of us have lost jobs, many have had to cut

back on expenditures. This has been painful and sobering for our society. We must hope that it is teaching us a lesson about the dangers of over-reaching materialism and debt, about the failure on the part of too many to be responsible for the common good, and about the need for appropriate regulation of our financial institutions.

Such times as these are a wake-up call. What they do, at their best, is call us back to God.

We must never allow lean times to blind us to God's abundance and our need to return thanks in generous giving. I firmly believe that next to prayer and worship—and inseparable from them—the most important aspect of our spiritual lives is our giving.

Our journeys in faith have transforming moments, decisive experiences that change us forever. One of mine involved stewardship. I had always “given to the church,” usually a set amount each week beginning with a dollar when I was young and working up to 10 dollars a week as a young adult (remember, this was an increasingly long time ago!). I had always thought of it as “my fair share” in support of the church.

Then one day a friend told me about his stewardship, how he and his wife gave a percentage of their income to God through the church, with the Biblical tithe as the standard they lived by. As a lifelong Episcopalian—and a clergy child at that!—I do not remember anyone telling me about percentage giving and tithing. Later, through the Alabama Plan of Stewardship Education, I learned much more, and Becky and I began a journey toward tithing, which we have done ever since.

The transforming part of it was not tithing itself. It was the focus on giving to God that changed everything. Our giving was no longer focused on the church budget or a fair share. It became focused on returning gratefully to God a faithful portion of all that God had given us, through giving to the church. What had been duty turned into gratitude. Money that had been a problem became a spiritual reality. Giving began to be a way of life.

Since then, I have considered offering each year 10 percent or more of all that we have as one of the most joyful aspects of our spiritual journey. It keeps us centered in the reality that life is gift, not our possession. It makes us aware, in lean times as well as prosperous ones, of God's unchanging abundance in our lives.

I heard Rowan Williams say last summer, “What is given to us is given to be given in return.” This is worth writing in large letters at the center of our lives. It is an essence of Christ's teaching and why the Bible is so chock-full of passages about giving. Money and possessions are sticky. The dark power of this world always tempts us to see scarcity and wants us to hold on for dear life to what we have. In radical contrast Jesus always says “let go.” It is in giving that we receive, not in keeping. Love gives. That is what it does.

Christian stewardship is a life-changing and life-saving practice. It keeps us in constant

awareness that our life belongs to God and that in the hierarchy of spiritual virtues gratitude is near the top. All our giving is our way of saying “thank you, thank you” for the abundant gifts of life and the saving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in all things.

When our Lord said, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also,” he was telling us a precious secret. What we do with our substance leads our hearts toward God—or away. This is what the ancient couple whose epitaph is quoted above had learned in their journey. Only what we have given away can we keep in eternity. What is given to us is given to be given in return.

All that we are and have is God’s extravagant gift. May all of our stewardship be extravagant gratitude.

Your servant in Christ,



The Rt. Rev. Henry N. Parsley Jr.

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