

Dear Ones,

I have heard a few folks suggest that this is a year to go light on stewardship, to soft sell it a bit and not push quite as hard. It will come as no surprise that I totally disagree—not because we have all had to tighten our collective belts this year or because my livelihood comes through your giving, although I know some will suggest that. No, my point is this: we need to talk about stewardship of our resources now more than ever. September is a good time to open up a conversation that I hope to have over several months leading into the “October Beg-a-thon” season. I hope we can change that once-a-year event into more of a way of life for the whole year, not just the fall.

In the next few articles, I am going to do something that Gary Heaton of St. Andrew’s, Port Angeles (thanks Gary!) and others have asked, and share some of the ideas and suggestions I usually reserve for our annual stewardship conference. Barring any superseding matters, I should be able to stay on target.

One of the most important facets of Christianity is the understanding of “gift.” During the last week of July at St. Andrew’s House’s “Vacation with a Difference,” about 20 of us explored the Gospel according to Dr. Seuss (theme shamelessly stolen from this year’s 6-Day high school youth conference because it worked so well). One of the days was “Christmas in July.” Leading up to that day, I announced we would exchange gifts. We had simple rules: no money could be spent and it did not have to be material at all. It was interesting to watch the tension rise. For the next two days, more questions emerged about what to give and how.

Eventually, everyone got into it and we had wonderful gifts. In some ways it was one of the best Christmases I have ever had. I was given a paper miter with the words “Captain Greg” on it (because I had dutifully driven the boat the night before); it contained a memory and a very kind thought. I searched the beach for about an hour and a half, looking for a shell with a hole in just the right place, an old rope and something to clasp the shell onto the rope. I eventually made a necklace for Ruby, the older daughter of director Jeff Gruber. Joe Astleford (Holy Spirit, Battle Ground) drew the name of 10-year-old Nick, learned he liked cooking and the two of them together made cookies for the rest of us. That was his gift to this young man. Eleanor Church (St. John’s, Snohomish) decided on a gift for everyone present, but especially the children. She asked my wife, Marti, to join her in singing “Don’t Fence Me In” to all of us in response to “Oh, the Places You’ll Go” by Seuss. She exclaimed to the children, “Don’t let anyone fence you in!”

At the end of our gift exchange I asked, “What is gift to you?” We had a great discussion about this and about the best gifts we had ever received, most of them not material at all. Gifts come from a deep place in the heart—freely given, with no strings attached, no transactions and no expectation of anything in return. Our example is the gift of Jesus Christ, whose gift was his very life for each of us. We might ask if our “gifts” to the church fit that description.

In the Christian reality, we believe we own nothing. All we have is a gift from God. We are merely caretakers of every bit—house, car, money, family—all of it. I am very glad I was brought up in and live in that reality. If we believe this, giving to the church should not be a burden or even an expectation but, as it says so well in II Corinthians, “cheerfully given, without compulsion.” I would go as far as to say that if it seems a burden or something given out of guilt, just stop doing it. Nothing is more important to give my money to than this church I love so much, even more so right now.

At General Convention, the Episcopal Network for Stewardship (TENS, on whose board Canon Carl Knirk and I serve) held its “Apostles in Stewardship” luncheon, which honors some this

work's heroes. One is the Rev. Hugh Magers, a prime mentor of mine in this ministry. Early in his speech, he said he is constantly asked if he believes in prosperity theology, which suggests that God will give you great wealth. When he concluded his lengthy talk, he said, "Let me come back to that prosperity theology stuff. Let me say I absolutely do not believe in prosperity theology; none of it ...but it has been my experience!"

Now that's a gift.

Faithfully,

+Greg

In Coming Months:

Stewardship in the Liturgy

Annual report of my giving (and why I think it is important!)

Saying "Thank You"

Dear Ones,

Last month I tried to make my case for not “going light” on stewardship this year. To back up my claim, I am going to continue for the next few months on that very topic. For years, as a rector and now as bishop, I have been open and transparent about my giving with those whom I serve. I have observed in my stewardship consultations over the years, nothing brings people more anxiety than telling others what they make and what they give, specifically, as well as the question, “Should the priest know what people give?”

I want to talk about our giving with specificity and why I think that is important. The first time I did this—having been convinced and converted by my work among my mentors in stewardship—I was terrified. As in most churches, money was not among topics of polite conversation, and getting real enough to start talking numbers was unheard of. I wrote a letter much like this, sat back and waited. Very quickly, the first call came in from a member of the parish who immediately said, “I got that letter!”

I was not sure where we were headed but to my amazement, the voice on the other end of the line said, “The Church has given so very much to me and to my family. I am not sure what I would do without it. I can take it so much for granted. When I read your letter I realized that I give more to my cleaning lady than I give to the Church.” She kept repeating that line. She went on to talk about how that was going to change; that she was not tithing but she was going to work toward it. The conversation transformed her and it transformed me. I remember sitting there with tears running down my face because, on the other end of the line, I heard a liberated voice; someone had discovered anew the giftedness of life and reordered her priorities. Those are always amazing moments.

We give money amazing power. Proof comes in just how gently and, quite frankly, secretly we handle it. Money itself is neutral. On its own it has no value; the value it has, we put on it. The meaning, good and bad, is something we create. I am sure Jesus knew of this power, and knew of our need for liberation from it. He spoke of money and our possessions more than any other single topic. I am convinced that we can take this anxious power away not by shying away from it and avoiding it more but instead just the opposite, by openly talking about it. Practically speaking, I am not going to ask you to do what I am not willing to do myself.

Along with other diocesan budget reductions, this year my salary has gone down, back to what it was when I arrived two years ago as your bishop. No matter. I am very rich and blessed; I know that. My wife has decided to go to work full time and that will make up the difference so our income will, for now, stay about at the level it was last year, something many will not know this year. Through all our work, my family stands to bring in about \$134,000 next year. Most of that is what you pay me but some money comes from other areas as well. With other benefits I get by being your bishop one could say I make even more. Even though this is not cash, I benefit from it.

We plan to give \$25,420 (15.5 percent) of our income away to various things in which we believe and want to be part. Of that, \$17,056 will go directly to the Diocese of Olympia through each church I visit and other ministries here (10.4 percent of our income). For the fourth year, we have also decided to follow the .7-percent plan to help the world reach the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set by the United Nations and commended by our Presiding Bishop and General Convention as something toward which we should all strive. My family and I have signed on and will give .7 percent or more of our income toward world poverty reduction. So, the additional \$8,374 goes to the MDGs and other charities we support.

Our son, Austin, follows the same program. He learned when he was old enough to know what money was to give 10 percent of it back, save 10 percent and live on the rest. Austin is earning \$25 a month, and so he gives \$2.50 to his church and saves \$2.50. (He has saved a lot; I may need a loan from him soon!) He and I talk about this a lot, especially when he asks for a raise! Always part of our conversation is the fact that making \$25 a month puts him in the top 10 percent of wage earners in the world.

All I can say is this: since I was converted to the tithe—knowing my income, conscious of my gifts—I have been deeply blessed and more generous. There is a wholeness I cannot exactly explain. As Christians, our life is not bound to the power of money and, being free from it, we are closer to the Power in whom we do find our hope and our salvation.

Faithfully,

Greg

Dear Ones,

In so many ways the liturgy is stewardship in action. In the midst of liturgy is the stewardship of our relationships; our life together; our call to be in and minister to the world. While we tend to focus on money when we speak of stewardship, it actually is only a very small part of this way of life for us. However, since we are really in that “season” of stewardship at the moment I would like to discuss the place of money in our liturgy.

One thing I really noticed in moving to an ordained role in the church was how infrequently the plate came to me. It was as if I was now “off the hook.” I eventually asked that it be passed to me so people could see me putting an offering in as well. I am happy to say it happens at our cathedral now since I asked about that some time ago. I see at some diocesan conventions and other church events that ushers bypass all of the robed “professionals.” I usually make a scene when this happens.

Last year I was part of a ceremony in which I was vested in the pews as a board member. Our prior two days of meeting time with the board was all about our financial situation and the fact that we had to “lead” on turning it around. Yet in this service, the bypassing happened as usual. I stood up and quietly asked those around me if they had intended to give. Indeed many of them, and so I began collecting money from the robed throng. In a few short minutes I had hundreds of dollars in my hand, and I rather unceremoniously carried it back to the shocked ushers standing there waiting to go forward.

People offer many reasons for the bypass: “You have vestments on so we think it might be difficult to get to your wallets!” “It seems rude to ask our board to give.” On the contrary—all should be offered the chance to give alms and to tangibly offer ourselves.

Money is one of the only tangible things we now bring to liturgy as a body. In earlier times the bread and wine brought to the service to share actually came from the homes of those who brought it forward, which is sometimes true but not nearly as much today. What our money symbolizes is the “sweat” of our lives. We put ourselves on the altar as every one of us has given part of our lives in order to have that money, no matter the amount, which has gone forward and is offered to God.

We often seem to shy away from this. I once actually witnessed a service (not in this diocese) where the offering was brought forward by the ushers veiled, covered up, so no one could possibly see the money. Then it was held up from about 25 feet away from the altar, the priest gave the sign of the cross from the distance, and then the offering was whisked away to an office just off the nave. I could actually see the counters counting the money as we said our prayers. Odd, to say the least.

It has always been very important for me to place this offering on the altar, to have it present there throughout our prayers. This symbol makes it clear that we do not see it as offensive or dirty or something we must apologize for in our Christian life. In fact, it is truly the offering of ourselves; it is us on the altar.

Equally, when we don’t do this, it also symbolizes something, even if words are never said. It signals that perhaps we should apologize for this part of our life together. One correlation I could make is a celebration of labor I often called for in my parish, where on Labor Day weekend people were invited to bring some symbol of their vocation. We would always joke that if you drove a forklift, please just bring the keys! It was always a powerful day to see all of the symbols

surrounding the altar and the church. We do the same every week in the form of what we have been given in return for our labor.

I encourage you to look for other ways we symbolize scarcity in our liturgy, and ways we can instead make a sign for abundance, to talk about our feelings of money in the liturgy, and to celebrate the giving of that money—the offering of ourselves to God.

Faithfully,