

Year A – Proper 26 “Servant of all”
“The greatest among you will be your servant”
(Mt. 23:11)

When I was a child I went to church with my Father who was a Roman Catholic. In the Sunday bulletin there appeared the weekly calendar and announcements along with a listing of all the people who had given to the church in the previous week. They were listed by category of gift: Less than \$5; \$5-10; and so on. Once I could read I checked it out each week, looking for my Dad’s name which was always there somewhere – usually in the \$5-10 category but sometimes more. My parents didn’t have a lot of money but he always put an envelope in the plate. It made me proud to see our name there in print.

Since that time, I’ve wondered why they did that. Was it to give positive reinforcement to givers? Wouldn’t that move everyone closer to the sin of pride?

It’s kind of like what a lot of large non-profits do these days. Even my seminary prints an annual list of givers by category of gift as a way of saying thank you. And I look eagerly to see if my name is included and

who else is giving at my level. It can feel like a competition. Isn’t that what Jesus is warning against?

I’ve never seen anything like that in a local Episcopal Church – at all. Kind of makes us squeamish, doesn’t it? The truth is that we really don’t want people to know what we give to the church. Unless we give a lot and then perhaps we’re more like those Pharisees who loved to wear their phylacteries and long fringe to show how important they were. And yes, I’ve known some folks (even myself at times) who were like that.

Sometime, in the late 1980’s, the Episcopal Church, at one of our General Conventions, made the tithe the minimum standard of giving to the church. I’ll never forget the Rector I served with who stood up with a flip chart and marker one Sunday and put his compensation up on the paper, multiplied by 10% and came up with a figure and said that was what he and his wife would be pledging to the parish that year. It was simple, he said, just multiply by 10% and put that on your pledge card. Committing to doing it will make it happen, he said.

That was the same parish that really did not have a pledge drive in the same way most of us do. Instead, on one Sunday in November, people walked up to the altar with their pledge number on a piece of paper – with no name attached. It was called “faith pledging”. The Vestry would have already created the budget which was also based on “faith” that God (and the people) would provide the needed resources. I’m not sure that ever came out the way they thought, but it was part of that parish’s practice.

That experience affected George and I profoundly. We began to recognize that the way we use our money is a reflection of our practice of our faith. And we worked our way to tithing and eventually beyond that. The danger of it, I discovered, is that we thought we had arrived and done all that we needed to do. Kind of like being a Pharisee, even though our tithing wasn’t really public, we felt good about it.

The truth is that we really are conflicted about our money. Maybe, like me, you sometimes feel guilty about spending on yourself instead of using it for the good of others. And our offerings to God have gotten all mixed up with running an organization. It’s like a tangled mess!

I once heard a Bishop say that stewardship is everything we do after we say “I believe”. It was a way of expressing the truth that all that we are and all that we have does not belong to us. It belongs to God

who created us, Christ who redeems us, and the Holy Spirit who leads us even now in this moment. But we act differently.

As stewards, we've been entrusted with our lives, of families, our riches (yes, we are all rich by the world's standards). And Jesus says that we are to be servants of the world. Our life is to show and live into the reconciling love of God in Christ. So, what does that have to do with our money? Well, everything, of course!

Money is this funny thing. It has a lot of value for us. On a simple level it is simply paper with a number and, increasingly it's a plastic card with a magnetic strip. The numbers signify what we have earned through our labor, what has been given to us, or what companies have paid us to use our money (interest, appreciation, etc.). It's hard for us not too attach our own personal value to it, especially when we're employed. That's a dead end road, for sure. Our value as human beings is inestimable in the sight of God! It is the world/culture that places higher or lower value on human endeavor. As a society we've come to accept the fact that human services (teaching, health care, social work, non-profit workers, religious, charitable work) will always have less money.

How does all of this impact the stewardship of our money as Christian community? I don't have all of the answers, for sure. Keeping our giving secret might be perpetuating a sense that this money is mine to do what I want. Perhaps we should consider ways to bring that out into the light.

Increasingly I believe that we have mixed two things that need to be addressed separately or perhaps in a whole new way. The first is what I call "funding the church". We need to pay our clergy and other staff a fair and livable wage. We need to keep up our buildings and pay for the heat and light. Offices, phones, paper, and so on, cost money. Monies have to be raised to do these things.

The second has to do with our spiritual health and practice. If we could separate our offerings to God from our budgets and begin to see our giving as an expression of our relationship with Christ, then we could make some headway. That's the real power of tithing. It's a spiritual practice that pushes the boundaries of our usual way of giving. Taking the "first fruits" of labor and consecrating them to the mission of God does something important to the way we live. I have to say that I've met only one ex-tither. And that was someone whose health and welfare underwent major deconstruction. Everyone else I've ever met who tithed has had a humble and joyful heart and way of being. When we tithe, our giving becomes about God and not funding the church.

And then, as a community, we need to struggle with funding the church in a way that fosters the mission of God to reconcile people with each other and God in Christ. What if we took a look at our budgets and started to ask that question? How does this engage us in God's mission?

I believe that if we took both of those steps separately, something wonderful, exciting and spirit-lifting might be the result. Maybe, just maybe, the culture around us would be enriched by newly empowered engaged in mission servants of God.

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