

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 and 11:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost – October 11, 2015

“New Beginnings”

Scripture: 20 Pentecost B (Proper 23)

So, I've shared with some of you a common experience I have been having in these first few months serving as your rector. I'll be working away in the office, and someone will drop by to take care of a little business out front, maybe something that has nothing to do with me, but seeing that I'm present and that the door is open, they inevitably peek into my office and ask to introduce themselves. And I am very happy to welcome them and meet members of this community of Saint Stephen's Church. And after a bit of small talk, everyone says something nearly the same, something like: “Well, (and here they would pause for effect)... welcome to a very challenging job!”

Now, the first couple times I heard it, I didn't think much of it, but when it became clear that everyone had the same sort of, I guess you could say “*ominous*” greeting, I started to take notice. But I can't say that am particularly surprised. In the short time I've been with you, it is easy to see that Saint Stephen's Church is a community of capable, active, intelligent, opinionated, motivated, and faithful persons. This is a community of strong feelings and deep concern for the church. Of

course this community is filled with challenges, because your church matters to you; it matters to so many and so diverse a body of Christians, each seeking something, and maybe something different, in the life of faith. And it's no secret that this congregation has been through a time of trial, a time when the changing tides of membership and leadership have left many wondering about the future. Where are we headed? Are we to remain an active and positive influence in the life of Edina and surrounding communities? Will we keep our young persons with us, and will our elders have someone to care for their spiritual needs? Can we regain that thriving sense of spiritual fervor that has been a mainstay of Saint Stephen's from its earliest days?

I would expect Saint Stephen's to present challenges, as much as I would expect us to address those challenges together with the same grace and wisdom and goodness revealed to us in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. The world is not well, and we need to be the light in this world that Jesus calls us to be. And that is what we are going to do. We need to use everything we are and everything we have to that end. That is for the Christian, after all, the earnest definition of... *stewardship*. And for us to get our spiritual house in order, we need to move beyond recent struggles in finance, reclaim a sense of generosity as a congregation that is as large as our church's call to ministry, and support God's mission for this church.

What do I see ahead ahead of us? We need assisting clergy to bring pastoral and sacramental care to a large body of members, and to work closely with our lay ministers who visit and care for others. We need to offer as much vigor and financial support as we give our teen ministries to our Sunday School children, as well as to that body of young single persons, those *twenty and thirty somethings*, who are largely absent from the weekly life of the church. We need opportunities for all our members to practice Christian faith through service in the world. I mean literally opportunities for mission locally and abroad. And for those who cannot undertake such service, we need ways to help them offer their prayers for those who can and for those we serve. We could support more members of Saint Stephen's Church in positions of leadership in the broader Episcopal Church in Minnesota. We need to welcome new members with a clear sense of our mission and identity as a part of the Body of Christ, offering them a path to membership that includes learning, opportunities for service, and a way to meet and make friends in small groups. These are a few of the things that come clear to me in these early times with you.

Why do people give money to their churches? I suppose there are as many reasons as there are people who give, but I figure that many hope the church will give meaning to their money, and they are realistic enough to know a Church must have money to operate. They like having a Church there for its positive moral impact upon their children. People feel it is important to have a house of worship, and they enjoy

the social elements of Sunday morning and holiday seasons. People want and need a community in which to mark important events in life. They want pastors to listen to them and pray for them.

All these reasons are viable. But, to me, the most profound reason one can decide to give to a Church is to express one's gratitude to God within a community of faith and to nurture and care for that community. The Church is the people with whom we learn to practice the care of Creation, and gratitude and generosity will be authenticating expressions of our faith. Where we pray and worship, we share. Where we grow with our families, we share. Where we are baptized and married and buried, we share. In the community with whom we seek God, we share. The Church is the community in which individuals offer what they are and what they have for the sake of other members and, ultimately, the world beyond itself.

Your Stewardship ministry committee has chosen for these times a theme of "New Beginnings: Abounding in Hope and Joy." One thing that brings me confidence is that, while we are experiencing these *New Beginnings*, our new start is built upon a firm and longstanding foundation of faith in God, and the faithful acts of the generations of St. Stephen's members who have given and labored to bring us to this day. We aren't starting from scratch here. Saint Stephen's Church has a strong history of ministry.

Now, the fire at the center of that Stewardship theme represents the light of Christ we bring to the world, the warmth we offer to those who need love and support in Jesus' name, the energy of the spirit of God that burns within the life of this community of faith. We are called to burn brightly for the love of God and the stewardship and care of this Creation. So, of course we are a challenging community, and a community that has its challenges. And that's why I want to remind us about fire and what it takes to keep it burning. A poem from Judy Brown... [READ "FIRE"]

Please take some time in peace and prayerful consideration in the days ahead that lead us to Covenant Sunday, the day when we offer our pledges for God's mission with Saint Stephen's Church. If you need guidance on how to give, or how much to give, please reach out to me, to Rick Massopust, or others of our Stewardship ministry. Please consider how you can give the church of your time and your money in a way that is faithful and sustainable, but also generous and meaningful, and, frankly, loving. Yes, loving...

See, I am always astonished by generosity. Perhaps not always the generosity of my fellow woman and man, but that generosity about God that is expressed in the Scriptures. In this morning's reading, Jesus says that many who are first will be last, and the last will be first. But it occurs to me that, whether first or last, we all finish

this race. Jesus did not come to condemn the world, rather to upset us in our comfortable presumptions and call us to new life as helpers in this world. He did not condemn the rich man; rather, the gospel says, he loved him. And that is why he told him the one thing that would truly make a difference: don't in your riches in order to inherit eternal life, rather share your riches for the good of others in this life. That is an expression of love.