

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 and 11:15 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost; October 15, 2017

“Share: A Consideration of Stewardship”

Scripture: Matthew 22:1-14; 19 Pentecost A RCL; Proper 23

I remember a time long ago early in my ordained ministry when a member of our parish Stewardship Committee approached me one Sunday with a bit of urgency. He pulled me aside, told me he had been reviewing the church pledge receipts, and then proceeded to scold me for donating money to the church. “We pay you, Tom,” he said. “You don’t need to pay anything back to us. That’s silly,” he said. “Paying the church?” I thought. Paying the church back? “You,” ---Tom--- and “us” ---the church? Not just (embracing gesture) all of ...us? Together? Were not my family and I a part of a greater whole?...

I could never pay enough to express my gratitude for what the church has meant in my life. I could never give so much that I thought I was dipping into my “private funds” rather than drawing from the deep well of gifts God has given me in this life of faith in Jesus. I could never meet some dollar value that could ever pay for what I personally receive by sharing life with you in this community of faith. To see the look of joy on the face of a newly married couple standing at this altar, to gather at the creek to share the joy of baptism with babies and grown-ups and kayakers staring

at us while passing by in the water, to watch so many of you comfort and embrace friends in their times of grief and trial, to hear the choir and the bell choir and our band, and our children offer song and praise to God because they want to!... You can't pay for that. You can only love it, nurture it, and share to help make it happen. And it's not just for ourselves, but for anyone God sends our way.

How shortsighted it was on the part of my former colleague in Stewardship to consider what we do in sharing our means as some ordinary transaction, a payment for services rendered or received. People, this is life in faith. And I don't feel the need to spend our time convincing you to give your money to the church. We are the church. We are stewards of the gifts we receive and give as the faith community of St. Stephen's Church. All of us. And all of *us*: our money, our creativity, our time, our interest, our attention, our selves... Our hugs, our laughter, our tears, our dreams, our struggles, our silence, our hopes, our hearts... our "everything" is what we have to give as we are able to give it. And *everything* that is worth *anything* is what we have to gain.

In the past couple years, we have renewed our generosity within this faith community. We've welcomed new members, new families, and new clergy. We've carried on with meaningful worship on Sunday mornings... and on Sunday evenings. We've celebrated life with our Senior members who led the work to repair and restore

the beautiful windows in our chapel. We sustained our Youth ministries, missions, and TEC weekends for teens. And we have taken the deliberate and necessary steps to offer a vibrant Sunday School as we publicly enter our search to bring into community a new minister for Children and Families in the coming year. We did this because we shared ---many of us, giving in accordance with our means--- time and money, by faith, for the sake of ourselves and others. So what I want to say is, “Well done!” Thank you. This stewardship, this sharing and good use of our gifts is how we take care of each other and how we share with others. Please, when you take time to pledge for the coming year, consider how important your part is in making our ministries happen.

And here is a hope and a vision shared by your leaders in this faith community for our ministries ahead... Let me put it in biblical terms. *“Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to the Father in heaven.”* --- Jesus. With what you offer in money and participation in the coming year that allows our means to grow, we want to share our story. We want to let our light shine, not to point attention to ourselves, but to help the people of St. Stephen’s Church more fully know of the life of this community, to more fully know the people with whom we gather in these pews and elsewhere, to more fully know the things we do, and our opportunities for mission and service, so that our work to glorify God and bring good news to a struggling world is not hidden but in full view. We want to call a person to

staff ministry to help us tell our stories, both within our church and to the broader community around us. We want to bring someone to communicate our calendars, activities, and opportunities to you, someone who can guide us and guide new members toward engagement with the church and facilitate participation in ministry, someone to build communications bridges between and among our various ministries and committees, so we can help each other help our church and community. And with your prayerful and growing generosity, we will do this in the new year.

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You know, I have always been struck by the strange and enigmatic character in the parable Jesus tells today, the man who made it to the wedding party, but who was not dressed for it. No wedding robe, Jesus tells us. And when asked why, the man says... nothing. He was speechless. You know, I think the man who was speechless in the face of the king's inquiry about his wardrobe could have said pretty much anything and found that the king was an accommodating host.

"With all due respect, your Highness, I don't own a wedding robe."

"Well, then," the king might say, "bring this man a robe and adorn him for the party as one of my honored guests."

"I have no robe, sir, because I offered mine to another who had none."

"Well done," the king might say, "the clothes you lack have become your honor."

“I didn’t know what to wear, your Highness. Such banquets as these are above me, and there is little I can afford.”

“Nonsense,” the king might say, “all you need to do is ask, and I will provide anything you need.”

But the man stood before the king seeming both unprepared and unengaged. He was invited to the wedding party, and that was an honor in itself. But with the invitation, which he did not have to earn, came the opportunity and expectation to participate. By our stewardship, by our pledges, by our participation in ministry, by our care for each other, by our care for others beyond this church, we are saying something! We’re saying we are blessed and grateful to be a part of the St. Stephen’s Church family. We’re blessed to be loved by Christ, and we’re blessed to be able to share that love with others.