

Thomas R. Cook  
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota  
9:00 and 11:15 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist  
The Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost; October 21, 2018

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## “Thank you, God”

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Scripture: Mark 10:35-45 (Proper 24B, RCL)

Note: Preached on the Sunday prior to our pledge ingathering for the coming year.

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I've been asked by your Stewardship Committee to offer us a word today about Covenant Sunday, about tithing, or giving a tenth of our income, or maybe beginning with some more modest percentage of our personal income, given to God's work through St. Stephen's Church, a word about how much of our means we believe God is calling us to give personally, spiritually, in the coming year. But first I want to tell you a story about my brother and my first capital campaign...

So, I have an older brother who was sort of a hero to me when we were kids. He was the brother who ---even though he was a big important teenager, and he even had a girlfriend--- would still give me his time, show me how to cast a fishing rod, tell me jokes, go swimming with me in the lake, and not pick on me even when the opportunity presented itself. He was genuinely friendly to me... still is. And one of my favorite memories is that on many nights, we lay in our bedrooms that were next to each other, listening to our mother working away in the kitchen that was just outside our sleeping area. And I still don't know entirely to this day what all she was

doing in there, but it made a racket, and it seemed to stretch late into the night every night, but soon after the kitchen light shining underneath my bedroom door would go out, and when it got all quiet in the house, my brother would come tiptoeing into my room and tap me on the shoulder, and we would sneak out into the kitchen, and by the light of the open refrigerator door, we would quietly make chocolate milk together and enjoy a late night snack of which my mother surely would not approve. And I felt like a big kid then along with my brother. It took me a while to notice that he always had me make the chocolate milk for him, but that didn't matter. I was happy to do it.

So, I still remember pretty well the day I came home from school, and my mother was waiting there to tell me that my brother was in the hospital, that he had somehow injured himself internally and had developed a serious infection, and that the babysitter was there at home for me, because she, my mom, had to leave right away, because my brother was having surgery that afternoon. I was pretty stunned, and I basically just sat in my brother's empty bedroom all afternoon and evening waiting for... I didn't really know what. I was frightened. It had never occurred to me that something could happen to my brother, and now I wasn't sure if I would ever see him again. My parents found me asleep on his bedroom floor when they came home late that night.

Well, my brother did come home a few days later. He occupied his old space in his bedroom, welcoming his friends who came to visit and welcoming me too, proudly showing off his gross incisions all covered with stitches. And then every night for quite a while, I would sneak out into the kitchen, quietly make two glasses of chocolate milk, and bring them back to the bedroom for a secret late night snack.

And that's when I went into action... I'm not entirely sure why, but I knew something had to be done. So I rifled through all my pockets and dresser drawers and gathered up all the loose coins I could find. Then I systematically went to each of my other three brothers, aged about 17 to 6, and made a pitch for their contributions to a fund in thanksgiving for our brother's return home. I think in all I collected about... 80¢. And on the next Sunday morning, I dropped the offering rather loudly right into the metal offering plates that passed under our noses each Sunday. Mission accomplished; offering offered; point made: ...thank you, God, for my brother, my family, for our life together. And, you know, I didn't feel like I had to do that. My brother was already well on his way back to health. I wasn't paying off the so-called "big guy upstairs," buying God's favor so my brother would get well. It was just a tangible way to express some appreciation by letting that money go. And I trusted it would become something good. And that was humbling... the giving and the trust. I mean, what is 80¢ in comparison with my brother's life? But that moment sort of set a tone for me in giving through my church that has lasted throughout my lifetime, and

that tone is largely built on a sense of humility and gratitude in light of the blessings I have known in this life, even through times when all was not as I wanted it to be.

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Jesus tells us that the one who would be great among us is really a servant with us. The one who be first is only so because she or he cares and works for the good of all. Giving our money is a contemporary part of that service. In fact, it is that tangible way any of us can serve the world through making possible the ministry of a healthy church, building up vibrant communities of faith like St. Stephen's Church.

One thing I believe our Stewardship ministry leaders have been trying to teach us this year is that Stewardship isn't giving a contribution to a worthy cause... it's the deliberate, thoughtful, and faith-filled managing of everything we have and everything we are, so that somehow, somehow we are supporting God's work, helping change lives for good by providing strong communities of faith that share a love like Jesus' love, communities that offer welcome, acceptance, healing, forgiveness, purpose for life, support in times of grief, and hope. That is what we are building here as St. Stephen's Church. It's what we are claiming to be. By being the church, we can serve each other and be open to welcome all people who God leads to this community.

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I've enjoyed many years now sharing life with my brother. We've seen each other grow up, go to school, get married, raise children, change jobs, struggle with

loss and grief, and find joy in family. I no longer rifle through my pockets for loose change or the odd dollar bill to make my expressions of gratitude to God. I've come to a point in my life where I know I have been given more than that... more blessing than that, more ability than that. I trust that we, as a faith community, are at that point to consider in relationship and prayer with God what we *can* give what we feel called to give in accordance with the means that we have been given. We covenant with God ---through the life of this church--- to give away a portion of the money we control in this world as part of that way we fulfill a promise in baptism to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to respect every human being, to bring into being and sustain the community of this church. That's something we can do; we have the power to share and to serve. It's a spiritual opportunity that always calls us to think and grow in faith, because we make an actual, challenging choice that matters to our bottom lines.

Next Sunday is our Covenant Sunday. One service together. 10:00. A celebration of our life as church and a promise to continue to share and work together to be a light for Christ in this world. Please... spend earnest time in prayer this week, asking God's guidance regarding what portion of your income, your means, you feel God is calling you to give in the coming year. Then come as we make our pledges and promises together.