

“Stewardship Clarity: Until the Until”
Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren
November 10, 2013

It is good to be with all of you today on this Stewardship Sunday, but I want you to know that, for some pastors, Stewardship Sunday is one of their least favorite Sundays on which to preach. Stewardship Sunday is their least favorite Sunday to preach on because it is widely understood to be the Sunday when the pastor will preach about money—not just about the evils of money which pastors like preaching about, but this is the Sunday when pastors are almost required to preach about giving money. The preacher will preach not just about giving money, but the preacher will preach about giving money to the church. Usually when the preacher moves into this moment of preaching about giving money to the church, he can see the eyes of the members of his congregation cloud over.

Actually, the sermon about giving money to the church is not just about that. It is actually about giving money to the church budget, at which point the pastor sees his congregation start nodding off, so this is never a comfortable moment for the preacher, and partly it's not comfortable because he is preaching about a church budget but, in case you didn't know, the pastor is also preaching about the pastor's salary, his housing allowance, his health insurance and his retirement, so now maybe you understand why pastors hate to preach on Stewardship Sunday.

Of course, talking about stewardship in terms of church budgets is a very simplistic and shallow interpretation of stewardship, as if stewardship is just about a budget, so I want to go a little deeper into stewardship. Stewardship, and the concept of stewardship, originates from two words. The first word is “stig”, which means “house”, and the second word is “ward”, which means “guardian” or “keeper”, so stewardship, in its original components, is about how we commit to being guardians of the house or, in the case of church, how we commit to being caretakers of the church.

So, in a broader sense, in a deeper understanding of stewardship, stewardship really refers to an ethic which embodies the responsibilities of planning and managing a local church's resources. Stewardship is about an ethic, so stewardship can be much more than a local church issue. It can be about the stewardship of God's creation, the environment. It can be about the stewardship of an economic system. It can be about the stewardship of our own bodies and taking care of what we put in our bodies and how we use our bodies. That is all part of stewardship, so today we're dealing with the stewardship of our church and its ministry.

Now, as we live out our lives, there are various entities and organizations that request, and in some cases demand, our support. Those of you who have ever given to a nonprofit organization know that, once you do that, then you are often inundated with requests for money from a whole host of other institutions, so if you give to the Sierra Club, you will soon hear from the World Wildlife Fund, or if you give to the State Troopers' Association, you will soon hear from the firemen, and then it becomes decision time. I've heard people say “You know, every month now I get a solicitation from some group, and most of these groups that are asking for my money I would like to support, so what I do is, I put them all out on a table and I decide, well, I've got this much money to give, so I'm going to give to this one but not that one, and this one but not that one”, so it becomes, in a sense, decision time about what group means the most to me and my life.

As we read Psalms 73 this morning, we are reading about the psalmist and his struggles to make decisions about what is most important in his life. Psalms, of course, are the prayers of Israel, and they were often sung in the context of ancient Israel's worship. Many psalms had an honesty to them that went much deeper than many of our psalms and prayers in today's world. These psalms were almost brutal in their honesty.

In Psalms 73, we have a prayer that begins with confession. This is what the psalmist is saying here. The

psalmist for Psalms 73 is saying: You know, I was slipping around and stumbling in my life because I was so envious of other people. I looked at other people who had way more than I do in terms of material goods, and I was swept up with envy. I couldn't look at them without wanting what they had, so I immediately must claim myself with the psalmist only about twice a day, and the psalmist says: They have no pain, they are in good shape, they have those really lucrative memberships in the gym down the street, they have no troubles, and the people seem to praise them. They are always at ease. This psalmist is filled with envy for these rich people and he says: You know, they get to live the way they want, their bulls breed, their 401K makes money even in the worst of times, and they don't even acknowledge God for anything. The psalmist is saying: You know, I'd like to be like that. I would like to have no worries, no struggles, no pains in my life, and not have to worry about how I'm going to pay my bills, so in the beginning of this psalm, this is about resentment. The psalmist is filled with resentments, and he says: I've been trying to live a good, clean life. I've been trying to do the right thing. I've been trying to follow the rules, and I am tired of it. I am tired of seeing the wicked people prosper and people like me, who are following the rules, are just getting the shaft. I am tired of that.

Of course, this psalm is going up to God. This is a prayer to God. The psalmist is arguing with God and lodging his complaints and trying to figure out how this can get better. Then, midway through the psalm, about to the halfway point, the psalmist has a moment of clarity, and says this. He says: When I thought how to understand this, the injustice of these folks whom I envy, it seemed to be a wearisome task until I went into the sanctuary of God, then it made sense. Clarity comes to the psalmist when he goes in to worship. Clarity comes when he goes back to his roots. He is reminded of what is important in life, so for the psalmist, being a part of a worshipping community allows him to find a way through his doubts, his angers and his resentments. He is reminded that he has a community of support to help him—a community that lives by a different story and allowed him to see a whole new way of living.

The psalmist came to understand that, not only did he need God in his life, but he needed the worshipping community to anchor him. He needed a sacred place to go, and he needed traditions, rituals and practices that helped him to hold his life together. He needed those connections to the past and those visions for the future to anchor his life. I think that is what the church offers in its traditions, that we somehow get anchored in history to what has been, yet our vision is always to the future for what shall be, and we live in a world that is always changing.

I want to share with you a brief story about how I slowly, but surely, began to understand that the church in my life, the local congregation in my life, was so important. Years ago, when I got out of seminary, about 18 years ago, I went back to my home church. This was in Sherrill, New York. It was Gethsemane Episcopal Church, and I had not been back in a long, long time. I went back and said "Well, you know, I am going to go back to my home church and see how things are". Again, I think it was close to 18 years since I had been back.

I walked into this old, sleepy little parish. As I walked in, there was Lona Coates, the organist, looking at me and saying "Tom Warren! What are you doing here?" "Well, I came to church." All of a sudden, all these people who were there when I was a young teenager were still there.

When I went into the sanctuary, I went down the aisle, and I plopped down in a pew. As I sat there in that pew, waiting for the worship service to begin, I heard the tinkling sound of water going through the heating unit on the floor. With that tinkling sound, my life came back together. I was there as a 14 year old boy, sitting there with my mother. I was there with the community of the saints, and I was whole. My life had been held together by the church. As a 14 year old wandering in the wilderness, wondering who I was, it was that pew that held me. It was that congregation that constantly lifted up another vision for my life. It was my mother's love that brought me to church and those mornings when I had many other things in mind but church, and it was that tinkling sound of water in the heating system that told me that God was right there and held me together throughout my life.

I share that story so that all of you can reflect upon the ways in which church has held your life together or is bringing your life back together, because church is about history. It is about tradition. It is about many, many different things, but it is about God being with us for every moment of our lives. When we are in pain, when we are wandering in the wilderness, when we say we are not sure if we believe anymore, God is there with us. When we are baptizing our children and turning them over to the love of a local church, we are saying God is there with us. When we get married, when we die, the church is there, and the church is family, so on Stewardship Sunday, though we may be tempted to think about it in terms of the pastor, in terms of the lights, in terms of the heat, in terms of the building (and it is about all of those things), it is also about where we ground our lives, where we find meaning in our lives, and how we take our faith and share it with the world, how we are nurtured to grow and challenged to grow in our faith and how we live.

Stewardship Sunday is about all of those, but for me it is mostly about gratitude—gratitude for how congregations throughout my life and how my Christian faith have guided me, nurtured me and made me whole. I give thanks for the church in this place. I give thanks for the church universal. It gives us hope in our lives. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Rev. Tom Warren, Pastor