

Gracious and Generous God
Open our hearts and our minds
As we reflect upon our ability to receive and share
The many gifts you have given us.
Amen.

I know this may be hard to believe, but last week I spent an invigorating 4 hours in class discussing the Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church with our Presiding Bishop's legal advisor or chancellor. Did you know that this document is reprinted after each General Convention and that it is meant to be used as a dynamic guide for our corporate life, worship and ministry together? I just thought that the Constitution and Canons were a collection of stuffy, writings about rules and regulations that were to be pulled out and dusted off whenever there was a church legal issue to resolve. But to my surprise, I found much more in this document!

Let me read a short passage out of Title III, Canon 9: Of the Life and Work of Priests. This is taken from Section 5b (p.85).

It shall be the duty of Rectors and Priests-in-Charge to ensure that all persons in their charge are instructed concerning Christian Stewardship, including:

- (i) reverence for the creation and right use of God's gifts
- (ii) generous and consistent offering of time, talent and treasure for the mission and ministry of the church at home and abroad
- (iii) the biblical standard of the tithe for financial stewardship

I believe this canon was in the forefront of Anne's mind when she asked me to be the co-chair of this year's Stewardship Campaign! "What better way for you to learn about the duties of priestly ministry". Thank you Anne for giving me this learning opportunity!

Since this is our Ingathering Sunday, I would like to focus our attention on this aspect of our communal life. The obvious question becomes: What is Christian Stewardship?

First and foremost, Stewardship begins with the recognition that our entire created world – plants, animals, humans and all of nature – in short, everything on our planet - is a gift from a generous and giving God. When we have this understanding at the very core of our being, we begin to see everything in terms of gifts received and gifts to be shared.

All that is asked of us in return is to be: **THANKFUL** for receiving them; **RESPONSIBLE** in using them; and **GENEROUS** in sharing these gifts with others.

Christian Stewardship is typically associated with three things that all people are supposed to have – **TIME**, **TALENT** and **TREASURE**, even though most of us would argue that we don't have enough of any of them.

The first two are direct gifts from God, the third is not. We are all given Time to live our lives on this earth and each of us has been endowed with various Talents and abilities.

But Treasure, as we define it, means money. God did not create money – humans did. We took the natural resources God did give us, the precious minerals within the earth, and forged them into currency and other treasure.

We then took this human creation and decided who should be worthy to have it and who was not worthy to share in this gift. Our distribution of this “treasure” has been unequal, unfair and unjust from the moment we turned God’s gift into human wealth.

We all know that there are people in this world who have financial resources and others who do not. It is estimated that 1 billion people on this planet live on less than \$1 a day. Treasure as we know it, has ceased being a gift from God and has become a human invention used to divide and separate us from each other.

Money can inspire in us a sense of confidence and well-being. Those with more wealth may feel a need to defend it. Whether consciously or not, we justify the inequity of money between who has it and who doesn’t. We may feel like we deserve it, or we earned and thus are entitled to it. At other times, we may be unable to justify this disparity and we wind up wrestling with feelings of guilt or shame.

Money is a great insulator against the threats and disappointments of life. Money encourages us to think of ourselves as self-sufficient. We are less likely to feel a need for human connection with others when we think that we can purchase whatever we need or want. This belief heightens our ISOLATION and keeps us disconnected from others.

This is why it is so important that we learn to SHARE our treasure with each other, for if we don’t, true community cannot happen.

We in the church have not always been good at talking openly about money. This includes both institutional and personal money issues as they relate to our life of faith.

Our patterns of spending aren’t just our private business. We are connected to the world. The daily money choices we make add up to larger patterns. These patterns determine the ways in which human energy is employed, how natural resources are exploited and the environment is impacted. Our financial choices shape the world we live in.

Ironically, the more money we have and spend, the more likely we are to be infected with a fear of SCARCITY. The more we depend upon money, the more likely we are to fear the consequences of losing it – or of giving it away.

Who among us hasn’t had such thoughts as:

- How will I survive if I don’t have money? Where will I live? What will I eat?
- How will I maintain my lifestyle? How will I be able to retire? How will I take care of my children?

Money, we believe, is the key to our survival, security and success. Money is the “bottom line” for most decisions made in our world.

We must become better witnesses, by word and deed, regarding decisions about money. Both our corporate and personal money choices connect us with the gospel of Jesus.

The Good News is this: It is in our power, by the grace of God to change the daily choices that we make regarding money. In so doing, we will change our own lives and the world around us.

In the scriptures, Jesus frequently talks about how wealth can be used for good or evil. There are many stories about the Rich and the Poor and how the Kingdom of God is coming among us to level the economic playing field. We are told that roles and identities will be reversed – the “have-nots” will be first and those who have will be last.

In our first reading today from Isaiah, we hear that God is going to create new heavens and a new earth; the former way that the world has operated will not be remembered. No longer will a select few hoard God’s bounty; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days.

For in the Divine plan, all people will share equally in the gifts that are given. Everyone will be glad and rejoice forever in what God is creating – a new Jerusalem that is free from despair and where everyone’s needs are met. God will delight in all the people and this recreated world.

In Isaiah, we hear that everyone in this new order shall have their own home and will enjoy the fruits of their labor. No longer will people toil all day for the benefit of another and be left with nothing. All of God’s gifts will be shared and enjoyed by everyone. The natural wealth of the land will become a TREASURE for everyone. Money will be used for the benefit of all people because our fear of scarcity will be gone.

God is calling us through Christian Stewardship, to be co-creators in this new world order that Isaiah talks about. When we share our human made wealth with others we are using our TREASURE in the way that God intends it to be used.

As Anne, Gretchen and our bishops Tom and Bud have reminded us over the last several weeks - the church is not in the business of granting individual needs or salvation. Rather, the church is about creating a community of faith, so that together we may carry on God’s mission in Jamaica Plain, in Boston and throughout the world.

In a few moments, all of us will be invited to make a public commitment in supporting the ongoing work of Stewardship. At the offertory, we will all bring our pledge forms and our financial gifts forward as one community, not as isolated individuals.

Let us continue to be THANKFUL for the gifts that we have received; RESPONSIBLE in using them; and GENEROUS in sharing these gifts with others.

AMEN

