

## PENTECOST XXIII

*(Jesus said) 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.'* Mark 12:37 ff

Today we are embarking on our stewardship campaign here at St John's. And we have the poor widow as our exemplar: she who gives not out of abundance, but out of conviction, out of faithfulness, out of a belief that giving is how God's work gets done.

On Wednesday, which I was thinking of as Black Wednesday after the defeat of marriage equality in Maine, I was emailing with my counterpart in Maine who heads the Religious Coalition for the Freedom to Marry up there. He wrote. Anne, a sad day in Maine with the defeat of marriage equality, so it seems we're in a familiar pattern of one step forward, one or more steps backward, only to keep pushing for justice. It will happen. Just not today. So like the persistent widow, we will not give up.

I replied, *well, it's a good thing we have the widow for our Gospel this week.* Then about halfway through the day I realized that I'd got the wrong widow. Marvin was referring to the widow in Luke 18 who kept coming to the judge with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.'

**4**"For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, **5**yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!' "

So, I had the wrong widow, but I like to see the similarities between them. For one thing, Scripture continually instructs us that God's work of justice is to care for widows and orphans, the neediest of the needy – to do charity. But here are two widows taking care of themselves, and in the case of our widow this morning, taking care of others as well. They are not after charity, they are after justice. And most of all, they are faithful. They keep coming back to God, staying connected to God, the God of mercy, the God of justice.

Last week after the service I talked to two parishioners who were talking about sainthood. Each was calling the other a saint, and each then protesting that *he* was not a saint, but the other one surely was. It was a lovely argument to walk in to the middle of. I asked what qualities they associated with sainthood, and one of them said, "never holding a grudge." That is indeed a rare and wonderful quality to possess.

I said that if I had to name one quality that I identified with sainthood, I thought it would be faithfulness. Not *faith*, not belief in a creed or even belief in God, which is how I think we generally, and mistakenly, define faith. But faithfulness; that is, steadfastness, constancy, loyalty, commitment.

I said last week that I don't believe the Communion of Saints is made up of perfect people – of “saintly” people, people with infinite patience, serenity, or even an infinite capacity to forgive. I do think of *the faithful* as people who have not deserted God, people who have remained in relationship with God even when that relationship consisted principally of anger, doubt, disagreement, disappointment, or depthless sorrow.

I value faithfulness very highly. I value it in myself, to the degree I believe I achieve it. I value it in others. And I have to confess that, as someone whose vocation it is to preside over a *community of faith*, as we say, I value very much faithfulness to the community, indeed, to the institution of the Church. I confess this: I privilege faithfulness above many other virtues.

For one thing, I believe that faithfulness, unlike certain other virtues, is made and not born. Faithfulness is a choice. Some of us may be more naturally gifted at faithfulness than others, but even so, it's always a choice, at one time or another: *am I staying, or am I leaving? Am I stepping up, or am I stepping away?* And even for those of us who have a certain innate stick-to-itiveness, we always face such choices eventually. And they are not often easy, not often painless.

When people talk to me about my accomplishments here at St John's, about how the community has changed, stabilized and grown during my tenure, I say that what I can chiefly claim is that I have stuck around. This is not false modesty. Sometimes sticking around has seemed almost impossibly difficult. But I have stayed because it was clear to me during the calling process that what St John's needed, first and foremost, was someone who would *stay*. Someone who would *stay* through thick and thin, who would *stay* long enough to nurture a sense of trust and security in the community, who would *stay* long enough to help that community develop a sense of identity, purpose, and mission.

That was what St John's, in particular, needed. But I have also stuck around because I believe, indeed, I know, that that's how the Church *works*. That's what the Church *means*. For all its many flaws, for all its frailties, for all its institutional failings, the Church is a living witness to human faithfulness, to the enduring value of *staying around*.

Of course, there is a caveat here. I don't believe people should stay in church situations that are ideologically oppressive and abusive. I believe we all need find our spiritual homes, and they will differ, as we differ. Christianity is not everyone's cultural or spiritual home, nor is the Episcopal Church, nor is St John's. I believe in freedom of choice, because I believe in religious and spiritual freedom.

But I also believe that once we have found a spiritual home, our calling is to be faithful. No spiritual home is going to be perfect. If our spiritual home is a church or synagogue, that home is embodied on earth as an institution, a human institution, and will be, like all human institutions, flawed. If we spend our lives searching for the perfect home, or if we find a comfortable home and then leave when, inevitably, something happens to make us uncomfortable, unhappy, or angry, we will spend our lives searching, and never settle, never commit, never rest.

If we are going to enjoy the true benefits of a spiritual home, a spiritual community, we need to stick around. Belonging, connection, trust, support, and intimacy do not happen overnight. If we seek for instant gratification, we are bound to be disappointed. If we believe we can find everything we want and need, all at once, under one roof, we are bound to fail. As our bishop Tom Shaw says repeatedly and rightly, "Living in community means that nobody gets to have their own way."

Another observation about community is that as long as we are tentative about our commitment, the returns, the rewards, of community will be provisional as well. The old saw about *getting out of something what we put into it* is old because it's true. But in terms of community life, as in any relationship, contributions and rewards don't balance on a daily or weekly or sometimes even yearly basis. Rarely are giving and taking in perfect equilibrium at once. But over time, if we have found a suitable spiritual home, I believe that most of us receive at least as much as we give, and often much much more.

I said at the outset that we are embarking upon our annual stewardship campaign at St. John's. And now I come to the very practical, very material part of the question of commitment to life in community. We are a small church. We are not a congregation of affluent members – we have no very deep pockets among us. We have an historic building with millions of dollars of deferred maintenance. Almost all of you are working outside the home or inside the home with small children. Many of you are in social service professions. We are trying to support and nurture a congregation of, largely, young families with young children. We have a barebones staff and a barebones budget, with which we are trying support outreach through our music ministry, our Angel Foods

Ministry, our donation of space to the JP Moms group, a group of their supervisors, an AA group, a yoga group, and potentially one or more neighborhood youth programs. We are known throughout the diocese, the Commonwealth, and even in the world beyond Massachusetts for our leadership in the LGBT justice movement.

The diocese does not support us, except in terms of small grants occasionally. Rather, we pay an annual assessment to support diocesan staff and programs. We have a small endowment – quite small now, as we spent it down by half to finish our basement renovation project.

What do these observations add up to? They add up to this: Our operations budget for the year is dependent upon what you - all of you – pledge as your yearly financial commitment to support your spiritual home. It adds up to need. We need all of you, and we need all of you to pledge as generously, indeed, as sacrificially, as you can, even in these difficult financial times.

It's not fashionable to talk about tithing in the Episcopal Church. If we dare, we talk about "proportional giving," that is, figuring our contribution to the church as a proportion of our yearly income. When you receive our stewardship brochure in the mail, in the next week or so, you will find included a small chart about how to figure proportional giving at various rates. The biblical tithe is ten percent. What we call the "modern tithe" is reckoned at 3% to 5% of our income dedicated to charitable causes.

I said that we talk about proportional giving *if we dare*, and indeed I've gotten into trouble in the past, here and elsewhere, by being bold enough to suggest that what people give to the church or charity is anyone's business but their own. However, I don't always steer away from trouble, and so I will say this now.

I have become a de facto tither. I cannot claim that I ever set out to practice proportional giving. But at this point in my life, I find that I am giving about ten percent of my net income back to the church. I donate to other cherished causes as well, but I give the most to St. John's. Sam, too, dedicates ten percent of his take-home pay to St. John's. We do this not because we're particularly good or unselfish people. We do it because we know that this is how the church works. This is how faithfulness works.

People have asked me why I pledge at all. After all, I have, in the old formulation, "given my life to the church." Why do I have to give my money as well? I'm not unique among clergy in this respect. Clergy tend to be significant pledgers because we know, as I said, that *this is how church works*. The church works because people give – they give,

in another old formulation, of their time, their talent, and their treasure. All three are needed. All three are needed from all of us.

And what I know – and what all those who study congregational practices know - is that people who give more money also give more time and more talent. Most of us don't pay to get out of the work, and in the end most of us don't work to get out of paying. In the end, those who give most money also give most from their store of time and talent. Giving more from one capacity leads us to give more from another as well. Jesus tells us, *where your treasure is, there will your heart be also*. Not the other way around. And that's empirically true.

Those of us who are wary about giving often say, *well, I really care, but I can't afford to give any money*. But that's not what Jesus says, and it's not how things tend to work. We pay for what we care about. What we pay for says, louder than any words, what our priorities are.

I have been running, and helping to run, parish stewardship campaigns for nearly 30 years. I've just told you the heart of what I know in a few terse paragraphs. I might have stretched my message out over more sermons, and they might have been kinder, gentler sermons. But we don't have time for that. Our Ingathering Sunday will be in just two weeks. We're having a campaign a bit like those public radio campaigns when they try to do it all in 10 hours instead of 10 days. Why? Because as I said at the outset, we have too few people trying to do too much work here. We need to be efficient, and we need your help. We are over-busy. So are you. So please, help us to do this necessary part of our work quickly and co-operatively.

My experience tells me that there are three basic and critical challenges about parish pledge campaigns. First, to convince people to think seriously, and pray hard, about giving more than feels comfortable, giving proportionally, and giving, like the poor widow of our Gospel, not simply out of abundance, but out of scarcity. Giving even when we feel we can't. Stretching, for the sake of something we say we care about.

Second, to convince people that it is *never too soon* to start giving. There's no waiting period before becoming a pledger. I am frequently asked what it takes to become a member of St. John's, and I am frequently tempted to reply, *pledge*. Jewish synagogues, as we know, require members to pay dues. We don't, so I can't formally give that answer. But I know what I believe, and I know what we need, and that is for everyone sitting in our pews on Sunday morning to make a financial commitment to the parish.

Third, to ask people to make their decisions about pledging, and make those pledges, by Ingathering Sunday. The most arduous and unpleasant part of a campaign is the follow-up: calling people repeatedly and reminding them, over and over, to make their pledge. No one likes undertaking this task, and no one likes being pestered, either. And we can't make our budget for 2010 until we know the pledge total. So this is a crucial part of our effort, to get our pledges in a timely way.

The *people* I'm talking about here are you. All of you. So please, help us out here. Do your part. Read the stewardship brochure carefully when it arrives in the mail. Prayerfully consider the maximum you can possible do. And then, commit yourself to supporting, either again or for the first time, this community that is our spiritual home.

The other day I was having coffee with a colleague – a woman I respect and admire as much as anyone in the diocese. She is very smart, an incredibly hard worker, extraordinarily faithful, and knows as much about this diocese and the national church as almost anyone I know.

She said, “You know, you think St. John's is a pretty cool parish. And I see your parishioners out and about in the diocese and in other places, and they think St John's is a pretty cool parish, too. And so does the bishop. I wish all parishes felt this way, and were this way. “

I took that as very high praise indeed, and very meaningful. I think we are a pretty cool parish. And I want us to keep on being one, whatever that may mean. We can't rest on our laurels here. We have to keep on figuring out what our mission is, and how best we can fulfill it. How most fully we can carry out God's work. How, like the poor widow, *out of all that we have to live on*, we can support our spiritual home, can be Christ's hands and heart to one another and in a needy and broken world.

Amen.

