

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
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Where is your heart?

This is number three in my five part sermon series on Spiritual Growth. The first sermon was on worship and prayer, and the second on a commitment to learning and study, especially the Holy Scriptures. This morning's sermon is on the subject of stewardship. So if any of you want to leave, now is your chance. After a two week vacation, I will be back with parts four and five on the importance of being committed to community with fellow Christians, and finally living out your individual calling in ministry.

I want to begin my discussion on stewardship by laying a theological and Biblical foundation. Christianity is a materialistic religion. That may sound strange, but what I mean is that in Christianity matter matters. The material world is important. What happens in this world, in this life is important. What we do with our bodies is important. What we do with our own personal wealth is important. How we treat the rest of creation is important. That is at the heart of Christian faith and morality. Matter matters.

This is true for two basic theological reasons. First, God is the creator of the universe. God the creator, upon looking over his creation, proclaimed the whole creation good, indeed *very* good. God who is good is the source of all that we know, and see, and touch, even ourselves. Though it is by its original nature good, the creation, and humanity along with it, is fallen, subject to evil, corruption, and death. That brings us to the second point: the Incarnation.

The Incarnation refers to the fact that God became a human being in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The creator became a creature. The eternal Word of God was incarnated, became flesh, in a particular place at a particular time in history. By this act, God formed a bond with

humanity and with all creation even greater than there was before. God blessed humanity and all creation in a new and unique way by becoming part of them. Even though this world and this life are important to God, they are not our ultimate goal. Our ultimate goal is to be with God. And God has promised to restore all creation, to perfect it. So while we are in this fallen creation, we need to understand that all that we are, and all that we have is a gift from God. It is not ours. It is God's. It is for now ours to take care of and be responsible for, but ultimately it all remains God's.

In a recent article in their newsletter one of the monks from St. Gregory's Abbey, the monastery I visited last year on my sabbatical, wrote this: "Everything in a monastery is community property, so everything must be shared and taken care of in a way that acknowledges that someone else has a right to use the very same item. The practice of monastic poverty is not meant to express any disdain for the world or the things in the world, but rather to instill in us the utmost respect for all of God's creation. In other words, by practicing stewardship rather than possessiveness, we affirm that everything receives its integrity and legitimacy from God, not from our possession or control of it."

Now, you and I are not under monastic vows of poverty, but let's just take a second and think about that concept. The vow of poverty is meant to underscore the transitory nature of this life and of all possessions. It emphasizes our dependence on God. It encourages a sense of community, cooperation, and interdependence. What would your life be like if you lived with the understanding that you really own nothing? It is all just passing through your hands. How would your life be different? Would it?

The concept that nothing is really ours, but it is all just on loan to us, is at the heart of Christian stewardship. Think about the difference, in your mind, between a book you bought at

the bookstore and one you borrowed from the library, or from a friend. Do you treat the borrowed book differently? Do you treat it better, more carefully? Are you less likely to set a cup of coffee on it, or to use it to prop open a door? Why is that? Because it is not yours. You are responsible for it until you give it back. That is stewardship.

Our responsibility and accountability to God covers ourselves, our own bodies, and has consequences for how we take care of ourselves, our diet, and our habits such as exercise or smoking. Stewardship of course covers our material possessions, the thing most people think of when they hear the word. And stewardship also holds us responsible and accountable for how we care for the rest of God's creation, from our treatment of animals to our care for the environment. I am afraid the taking care of our own bodies and the care of creation will both have to wait for sermons on another day.

With regard to our stewardship of our personal possessions and wealth, we bear the responsibility to use what we have for our own good, and even to enjoy it. We should enjoy the fruit of our labor. We also bear the responsibility to care for the poor and needy. Scripture frequently mentions the need to care for widows and orphans as well as foreigners, in other words the powerless and disenfranchised of society. We bear the responsibility to use our personal wealth and possessions in such a way as to cause no harm to others or creation. Finally, we bear the responsibility to use our personal wealth in such a way as to glorify God.

In the Old Testament the tithe is the standard for minimal giving to God and God's purposes. In the agrarian society of the day it was expressed as a tenth of your crops, and it was to be the best, the first fruits. Jesus in the New Testament affirmed the tithe, or ten percent, as the standard for giving. But Jesus had a lot more to say about money and wealth. Remember the Rich Young Ruler? He asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. When Jesus quoted

the commandments to him, the man said he had kept them all from his youth. Jesus tells him, “There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” (Luke 18:22-25) Was Jesus telling the man, and by extension us, that we must all sell all that we have and give it away? Or was he telling the man and us that our possessions can very well get between us and God, and even imperil our salvation? Of course Jesus sets the example for us. Does he give one tenth? No. He gives of himself totally, without holding anything back. One hundred percent. And by giving himself on the cross he gives us life –life abundant, and life eternal. What is our proper response?

We make our truest expression of faith and our most appropriate response to God’s extravagant love when we celebrate our sacramental worship. In the sacraments, we also see the materialistic nature of our Faith. If God can become Man, then Jesus can be truly present with us in something so common as the bread and the wine of Communion. The other word for this act of worship gives us a clue as to our proper attitude toward God for all that God has given us, and especially for our salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. That word, *Eucharist*, means thanksgiving. To give thanks. I think that is really what God wants from us. Gratitude. God wants us to live eucharistically.

So what does it mean to live eucharistically? When we are aware of all of our blessings, and thankful for them, it fosters a true sense of generosity within us. The great irony is that generosity breeds joy, a further blessing. And generosity is not about how much you give. It is not about the amount. The real genius behind the tithe as a standard of giving is that it turns our attention to our gift as a percentage of what we have received. We begin to see our gift to God as a proportion of all that we have been given by God. Proportionate giving simply means

giving in proportion to what you have. Those who have more will give more. Those who have less will give less. Both can be considered generous. It's all relative.

I will end with a few words of practical advice on the subject of tithing. If you are not currently a tither, I do not intend to make you feel bad. I do, however, encourage you to begin to take account of your pledge, or your giving to the Church as a proportion of your income. First, let's recall the spirit of the Old Testament law regarding the tithe. It was to be the first fruits. Give to God first as an expression of gratitude for what you have received and an act of faith that God will continue to provide for you. With the attitude of thanksgiving, prayerfully consider what proportion of your income is appropriate to dedicate to God's purposes. Then take a look at where you are now. What proportion of your income does your pledge represent? If it is less than a tithe, then maybe you can commit to raising it. It may take a number of years, but maybe you could achieve a tithe in a reasonable amount of time. Think about it. Pray about it.

This is a powerful spiritual exercise. It is no coincidence that Jesus spoke so much about money. It can really be a stumbling block to our faith. When we take a look at this, we are forced to compare how much we give to the Church to what we spend on other things. It forces us to look at our lifestyle. Is there something we could live without, or at least cut back on? How much of our income is spent on nothing in particular? You know what I mean, that money that just seems to disappear from our pockets, and we don't seem to have much to show for it.

Once you have considered all these things, and I mean realistically considered them, and you have had the chance to discuss it with your spouse, because this is a relationship issue too, then make your pledge. Pledging itself is an act of spiritual growth. Even more important than the amount of the pledge, even more important than the proportionate amount of the pledge, the act of making a pledge is very important to our spiritual well-being. A pledge is a commitment.

Where is your heart?

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Following Jesus is a commitment. Being part of a congregation is a commitment. Making a monetary pledge commits us in a very real way, in a material way, to living out the pledge of our baptismal vows to follow Jesus. “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

(Matthew 6:21)

Amen.