

**24 Pentecost
November 19, 2017**

**In the name of the God of all creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the spirit.
Amen.**

This morning's gospel reading is a very well known story about a master and three servants. The master is going on a journey so he entrusts his wealth to the servants ... his stewards. To one he gave five talents; to another he gave two talents, and to the third he gave one talent ... in the words of the text ... "each according to their ability." After a time the master returned from his journey and asked for an accounting. The first steward had doubled his investment, from five to ten talents. The second had also doubled the investment, from two to four talents. However, the third steward claimed that he was fearful of taking a risk and so he buried the one talent that had been entrusted to him. He returned the one talent to his master, but his master was angry that the steward did not increase his wealth. The story in Matthew's gospel ends with "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have in abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."

I would have thought Jesus might have said something like, for all those who **give** much, more will be **given** to them and they will have in abundance; but from those who have **given** nothing, even what they have will be **taken** away." But the way it is written it says that those who **have** will get more, and those that don't **have** will have it taken away. It seems that the issue of income inequality was alive and well 2,000 years ago. Again, as like last week, we don't have the privilege of rewriting the Bible ... it is written the way that it is written.

Remember, a "talent" in this story is a denomination of currency ... a rather large denomination. Some scholars say that it was worth 6,000 denarii, and a denarii was the usual pay for a day's labor. Thus, a talent would be worth over 15 years of wages for a simple laborer. The 2015 median income in the United States was almost \$54,000. Fifteen years times \$54,000 is \$810,000. Five talents is therefore worth over \$4 million in today's currency. Now, other scholars are more conservative in their estimate of its value, but a "talent" was obviously a lot of money.

Now this story is often the basis of a stewardship sermon ... a sermon about giving to the church. I already preached a sermon about supporting St. Cyprian's with your financial resources, so I am not going there this morning. Instead, on this Sunday before Thanksgiving I am going to talk about stewardship, but stewardship of God's currency, not the material currency of the world. And specifically I want to talk about the stewardship of God's currency in this congregation of St. Cyprian's in this small corner of God's vineyard.

St. Cyprian's, at its core, is a community of faith. As a community we depend upon the contributions of each and everyone associated with our community. These contributions

include all the personal efforts in our various ministries and committees; and it includes the sharing of expertise and experience in particular areas of our life together. Members of our choir share their musical talents ... and here I am using the word "talent" in its modern usage ... members of our choir share their musical talents and their delight in its beauty, as we worship together. Ushers greet fellow members of our church community, and welcome newcomers and visitors. The Altar Guild prepares our sacred space for Sunday morning and then delivers flowers to nursing homes or shut-ins after our services. Other people read lessons, serve as acolytes and chalcists, host Coffee Hour and receptions. Some mow the lawn, sweep the walk, water the plants, and build a railing at the sacristy steps ... thank you Weymen. People of St. Cyprian's write cards to the ill or grieving, while still other visits those who can't make it to church on Sunday. Whether it is cooking a casserole for the homeless, serving as a volunteer at the Wildflower Medical and Dental Clinic, or distributing food at the Ecumenical Food Pantry, it is obvious that the people of this community are eager to contribute their time, their spirit, and their passion to our ministries. Everyone in this congregation contributes, in one way or another, to the fullness of the life of this community.

However, there is also this sacred space to maintain, and salaries to be paid, and insurance premiums that come due, and office equipment to service. You get the idea. As well as all the contributions of people's time and efforts there is the much needed contributions of financial resources to support our budget. Whether it is a few dollars a week or a substantial donation all the contributions of the people of this congregation keep St. Cyprian's alive and well ... a beacon of faith in neighborhood and the greater community.

All too often church congregations ... especially in the Episcopal Church ... are judged on their size and their financial strength. Every year each congregation in our denomination around the country files what is called a "Parochial Report." Essentially it is a summary of three things: the number of baptized members; the average Sunday attendance at all services; and the size of the congregation's operating budget. Using the Parochial Report the Episcopal Church produces tables and charts reflecting the health of the Church ... at least by statistical measurements. By those standards the health of the Episcopal Church is not declining ... which is true for almost all mainline Christian denominations. The Episcopal Church in this country has lost 18% of its membership over the past decade. Although this Diocese ... the Diocese of Florida comprising 25 counties in the northern part of the state ... lost only 6% in the same time period ... it is still a loss. And when taken in the context of a quickly growing population base in Florida including this Diocese it is all the more startling.

However, statistics tell a different story for St. Cyprian's. In the past 10 years the size of the congregation has tripled. The contributions to our annual operating budget has grown from less than \$30,000 to almost \$150,000. In 2008, a year after a large contingent of conservative evangelicals left St. Cyprian's and the Episcopal Church, the tiny remnant congregation pledged roughly \$27,000. Our operating budget was supplemented by a grant from the Diocese of Florida. The following year, in 2009, our pledge income had risen to \$36,000; and the year after that to \$50,000. In 2011 we no longer received support from the Diocese of Florida and we became financially self-sustaining for the first time in the over 100 year history of this

congregation. The congregation's support of St. Cyprian's operating expenses has continued to grow and this past year the pledges of the congregation totaled over \$120,000.

In 2011 we also built the Commons at St. Cyprian's ... and it has truly been a blessing to this church. The paver courtyard with a labyrinth design imbedded in it, the outdoor chapel, and the Prayer Wall have transformed St. Cyprian's public "persona" in the Lincolnville neighborhood and greater St. Augustine. This was all possible because of the exceedingly generous contributions of members of St. Cyprian's and others.

In spite of those statistics, I believe that when a congregation, or a diocese, or the whole church measures itself by the standards of the world it loses something very valuable ... something that cannot be quantified. When the institutional needs ... as measured by statistics ... become more important than the message of the gospel everyone loses something. When the leadership of the Church ... from top to bottom ... acts more like a CEO of a corporation rather than a pastor to people ... we all suffer ... and the world around us suffers.

But, when a congregation deals in the currency of God ... justice, compassion, inclusion, mercy, radical hospitality ... then people will grow in spirit and seek to live fully into the image of God. That is stewardship of the gifts that God has given us. Not the material wealth of the world's currency, but of the deeper wealth of living as a beloved child of God.

Stewardship is more than just opening one's wallet or checkbook and making a donation to the church. Stewardship is a way of life. It is about seeing our lives and everything around us as a gift from God. This God of all Creation willingly bestows upon us gifts beyond our imagination. Sometimes they are full of wonder and beauty and are received joyfully. Other times they are painful and are received with grief and sorrow. Yet they are all gifts of what we call life.

God has bestowed gifts upon us all, and God asks us to give in return. Since God does not have a purse or pocket we have to give back to God by giving back to God's creation in all the many ways that we have available to us. We give back to God in God's currency. Sometimes it is our time, sometimes it is our spirit, sometimes it is our suffering, sometimes it is our passion, and sometimes it is our money. But it is in giving to God of the currency of our lives that we bind the covenant that God has initiated. It is in our giving that our spirituality deepens, and that we learn to trust in the one who created us rather than to trust in ourselves.

I encourage you to see your faith as a prayer of stewardship: In the words of our Catechism, "a response to God, in thought and by deed, with and without words." Care for the earth ... because it is God's creation. Care for those with whom we share this planet, in our backyard and across the globe ... because we are all God's children regardless of nationality, or tribe, or the color of our skin, or the faith to which we are committed. Care for those generations who will come after us ... for they too are the children of God. And care for this community of faith ... because we are doing the work of God in this corner of God vineyard.

On this Sunday before Thanksgiving I give thanks to God for this beloved community of faith. Your gifts of time, talent, and treasure ... in all their many forms ... make us who we are today. Your stewardship of this congregation through your prayers of thought and deed, with and without words impacts not just us, but the world around us. Each of you, in your own way, contributes something to the whole ... and this congregation is more than just a sum of its parts. Thank God for the many blessings that we know ... and thank you for your blessings in all you do to give back to God's creation in the currency of God.

Amen.