

In the name of God-Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.

It occurs to me as I read the lessons for this morning, that perhaps they should have been saved for stewardship season in the fall, as we gear up for the playoffs and the World Series. I have on occasion preached on stewardship themes, but it is not my favorite topic. No one enjoys asking folks for money, even for a good cause, and few are good at it. Of course none of us really should have to be asked, and that may be a part of what we hear in Scripture today, particularly in Isaiah, the psalm, and the Gospel from Luke. Lest you think I am doing something I and other preachers have been known to do on occasion, that is to talk about something about which I know little, I need to tell you of the time 30 odd years ago, when I co-chaired the every member canvass at St. Joseph's with my dear friend Dr. Patrick Kenan, whose ashes I buried in the garden area there five years ago. We announced, with appropriate solemnity and straight faces, that anyone who has not tuned in a pledge card by such and such a Sunday morning would receive a personal visit from the two of us that Sunday afternoon. In truth we had not the slightest intention of carrying through on that threat, but the congregation didn't know that, and it worked too. Dr. Kenan I recall also had two great fundraising ideas, neither of which got a majority of the vestry votes unfortunately. One was to turn off the heat in the winter or the air conditioning in the summer and announce it would take \$X to get it fixed. His

other I thought inspired idea was to convert the parking lot into a cemetery but allow only the flat Moravian gravestones so it would continue to be used as a parking lot. In the 22 years I have been ordained, I have only once been asked if I might work stewardship into a sermon and I of course agreed. This was several years ago. All I remember is that I said it sure would help if we could figure out a subtle way to take up a collection at weddings and funerals, and I even suggested that if need be, they could start at my funeral. Our treasurer loved it, but the idea never got off the ground.

Jesus taught, in the Gospel from Luke today, what we are perhaps more familiar with in the offertory sentence from Matthew:

Lay not up for yourselves
treasure on earth, where
moth and rust doth corrupt,
and where thieves break
through and steal, but
lay up for yourselves treasure
in heaven, where neither moth
nor rust doth corrupt and
where thieves do not break
through and steal, for where
your treasure is, there will
your heart be also.

Put another way, sometimes our check stubs reveal something of our priorities. As we saw in the Gospel from Luke a week ago, in Jesus' discourse with the wealthy young fool, whose goal in life seemed to be to accumulate as much stuff as Donald Trump, he too had his priorities mixed up. Jesus warned him he

needed to realize he just might be on the verge of death, and he should get his priorities in order. That's hard for those of us, all of us if truth be known, who enjoy the good life and like accumulating stuff. We need to remember though that no one has ever seen a Brinks truck following a hearse. I did though hear a man say once that while he knew he could not take it all with him, he was confident his wife would bring it with her later.

This thought is echoed as well by Jesus' admonition to his followers to sell their possessions and give alms. In other words, liquidate your Merrill Lynch account and the beach house, maybe even the Mercedes and pay the net proceeds over to the poor, to the Church. I knew of a fellow once who paid a price for not following Jesus' advice. He had a white Mercedes customized into a stretch limo, with neon wheels, and he used it to sell drugs, while dressed in red velvet. I pointed out that if he drove the Plymouth Acclaim I then had and dressed more like me, he could likely deal drugs up and down Interstate 95 all day every day with impunity. His answer has stayed with me "Mr. Craven, if I have to drive an old Plymouth and dress like you, what's the point?" OK, life is full of choices.

The prophet Isaiah, writing roughly 2700 years ago, had much to say about Hebrew worship practices of the day, in particular all the emphasis on ritual animal sacrifice, and the divine displeasure with it:

What to me is the multitude of
your sacrifices? I have had enough
of burn offerings of rams, and the
fat of fed beasts; I do not delight
in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or
of goats...Bring no more vain offerings.

In other words, Isaiah told the people of Israel, and us, that God has flat had it with religious superficiality. Besides, as God notes in Psalm 50, all those animals belong to God anyway.

We slip up too in our worship at times, and again, our check stubs may reveal our own priorities, and to some extent the objects of our own worship. We are of course more subtle about it now, most of us anyway, than some were 2700 years ago. No animal has ever been sacrificed here, but we do carry some similar baggage with us, in (I hesitate to say worship) our admiring/covetous attitudes toward money, power, appearance, sex, and the like. We know the winner is not the guy who dies with the most toys, the youngest wife, the fastest sports car, the most natural looking hair piece, and so on, but we also need to be reminded of that fallacy on occasion.

We can do something about that though. I was a prison chaplain for 17 years, and our worship like that here focused on the Eucharist. Initially we did not have an offertory as such. We had no plate to pass if truth be known, so why bother? Well a friend reminded me that we were skipping a pretty important part of the liturgy, that sure, the men and women were unable to put money into

a non-existent plate, but there was a lot we could offer up. For example we could place on the altar our hopes and fears, our neuroses and grudges, our dreams and concern for others. We could empty ourselves of all that dead weight we like to haul around, remembrances of wrongs and slights decades old. Well, we can do it here too, and guess what. We will get rid of all that excess baggage and accumulated stuff, and we stand up straighter, we have more energy, and we are all better equipped to go out from this holy place to where the real work awaits us, to be the hands and feet of Christ in this world, now in the time of this mortal life, to be Christ to others even as we see and recognize Christ in others, in the hospital, the parking lots, in prison, and in this place. That's why we are here, not for the Eucharist as an end to itself, but for the energy the Eucharist, the body and blood of Christ, gives us so we can get up and go out and do God's work. The answer to the question "Where is the Church going?" is not "To Mass," but rather to where the suffering are, those Jesus loved. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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