

Sermon Preached October 25, 2009
Year B, Proper 25
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
North Andover, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Wilson

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

A priest friend of mine tells a story about a great church leader who came to speak at his parish. This leader was a well-respected speaker and preacher. The title of his lecture was "Gateway to the Spiritual Life." My friend did a lot of advertising in preparation for the visit and told everyone about this wonderful man and his rich spiritual life. My friend put up signs and made announcements. He built up lots of anticipation. The night of the big lecture, the church was packed. Everyone was excited. What would he speak on? What was the gateway to the spiritual life? Was it prayer? Maybe it was helping the poor? Or perhaps he would speak about faith and hope? The speaker got up to the pulpit, everyone leaned forward in their seats, and the speaker began to talk about --- money! His talk on the gateway to the spiritual life was about money.

Now this may sound odd to us. We often think of money as something worldly and dirty. We separate it from that which is Godly and spiritual as though they have nothing to do with one another. But in fact, money is one of the most spiritual of topics, and the best place to be talking about it is in church. Jesus himself talks about money all the time. It is one of his favorite topics.

In scripture Jesus tells roughly 40 parables. Over half of them either have to do with money directly or make some significant mention of money. Just look at the titles of some of the parables: The Pearl of Great Price; The Unprofitable Servant; The Talents; The Lost Coin; The Two Debtors; The Hidden Treasure; The Spendthrift Son. So I want to talk to you this morning about money and the Church and you, for the very simple reason that this is precisely what Jesus talks about a great deal. It's the gateway to the spiritual life.

There's a passage in Luke where Jesus says, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." [Luke 12:34]. Where do we put our time and

energy and money? That's a pretty good indicator of what we value.

If we go to someone's house and notice that they have an outstanding garden, we can be pretty sure that they value gardening, otherwise they wouldn't spend the time. If we go to someone else's house and notice that they hardly have any furniture, but they DO have an amazing art collection, we know they value art over a well furnished home. Where you put your time and your money says something about who you are and what you value.

There's a story of a man named Paul who said that his first big step in stewardship came when someone suggested this very thing, that you can tell what a person's values really are by looking at the way he spends his money. Paul looked and didn't like what he saw. He said: "I resolved right then and there that I would not give less money to my Church each week than I spend on Scotch Whiskey." Since he was someone who loved real Scotch Whiskey, he doubled his pledge.

Where do you put your treasure? Where is your heart? Does your giving truly reflect your values?

One of the things we learn from the Bible is that giving is more than an indication of what we value, it is also an expectation of a Christian. It's part of a spiritual life. The spiritual life is one that encompasses all aspects of life, not just Sunday morning, and money is a powerful part of our life every day.

Scripture tells us that the minimum Christian giving is the tithe. The tithe is 10% of our income. To those unfamiliar with the tithe, it can sound like a lot of money, but when we consider what we have received from God, we realize it's a very small portion of the whole. God gives us everything and yet all God asks for is 10% as a way of saying thanks.

There's a riddle which asks, "What's the difference between a tip and a tithe? – A tip is 15% and a tithe is only 10%!"

I made the decision about 10 years ago to begin tithing. I give 10% of my income to the church. At first it was very difficult. I kept thinking of all the things I could have bought with that money. But I kept reminding myself that it isn't my money and I am giving 10% to God, instead it is God's money

and He is letting me keep 90% of it! Today I don't even think about it. When my paycheck comes in, I immediately send in a check to St. Paul's for 10% of the total.

We first learn about the tithe in the Old Testament. The books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus outline it as the offering required by the people at the Temple. They were told to set aside their "first fruits" – that their offering to God should be the first portion they set aside, not what remains. For instance, when someone grows a harvest of grain, they set aside the best of harvest, the top 10% of the grain, to bring to the Temple as an offering. We also are encouraged to do the same. We don't pay bills and then give God what's left over, we set aside our tithe and then live on the rest.

This can be hard when we've got mortgages to pay and groceries to buy, but if we give faithfully and cheerfully, we will find unexpected blessings in our lives. Believe it or not, giving is not for God's sake, it's for our sake. In the book of Malachi God says, "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for

you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.”

When we give freely and generously, we will find it comes back to us tenfold.

Leo Jesudian, a lay person from Trinity, Concord, gave a wonderful witness to us at our stewardship dinner about how riches have come to him by virtue of his tithing.

One of those blessings we receive is simply changing our attitude about money. We are a consumer culture who define ourselves by what we own and what we buy. We are slaves to keeping up with the Joneses. If we could define ourselves not by what we possess, but instead by what we give, we would be free. Using our money in ways to serve God’s kingdom will set us free. Consider unleashing the power of stewardship in your life. And it is a power! Stewardship means acknowledging that we owe God our very existence. It means sharing our gifts, financial and otherwise, with God. It means being ready to receive countless blessings and freedom from our joyful giving! There’s a saying which asks, “Do we look at life from the viewpoint of scarcity or abundance? ‘If you want to be rich, give! If you want to be poor, grasp!’”

I recognize that there are some people who because of fixed incomes or unemployment may not be able to tithe. All sized gifts are gratefully received. But for most everyone else the tithe is possible. Perhaps start small, giving only 3% this year and then each consecutive year add another percentage point until you reach the tithe.

When I was a child I remember sitting in the choir stalls at Christ Church, Andover. I was an eight-year-old member of the girl's choir who yawned her way through the rector's sermons. Week after week I followed the service, and I understood most of it except one part. What was the deal with the offertory? We'd sing a nice hymn, the collection plate would go around, everyone would give money in little envelopes. Then the silver plates would come forward, the rector would raise them up while we sang about how great the money was. Or at least I thought that's what we were doing! It seemed a little sacrilegious to me. Why talk about all this wonderful God stuff and then ruin it with lifting up the money so we could worship it?! Aren't we supposed to worship God? I was puzzled.

The answer as I discovered later in life was that we ARE worshipping God. When the priest lifts the money up, it's our way of saying, "Look what God has blessed us with! Our God is amazing and has given us everything. Now as a way of saying thank you, we are giving some of it back to God. And here it is!" "Praise God from whom all blessings flow!" We aren't worshipping the money, we are worshipping our Creator who gave us the money, and saying thank you!

Giving, pledging, and tithing to the church, is our way of saying thank you to God. It is a way of letting go of our need to keep up with the Joneses. What we do with our money is the gateway to the spiritual life. How we deal with worldly issues affects the spiritual. Please prayerful consider the stewardship of money in your life as you prepare to make your pledge to St. Paul's for the coming year. You will be receiving a letter from me and a pledge card in the mail soon. We will make our offerings on the altar at church on Gratitude Sunday, November 22.

Amen.