

Church of the Good Shepherd  
and  
St. John the Evangelist

24 Pentecost  
November 19, 2006  
Fr. Bill McGinty

**“You Did it for Me”**

Every November we begin our Stewardship Campaign as a part of our Annual Parish Pledge Drive. Traditionally we intergrated our giving for the year with the end of the church’s year and as a way of budgeting for the year ahead. Written into the Rector’s job description in our parish, is the instruction that a campaign will begin with a Stewardship sermon by the Rector.

Your Rector has to tell you that as Episcopalians we are mandated to enter into a covenant with God and a part of that covenant is concerned with the way we forward the Gospel and the mission of our Lord Jesus Christ by how we support that mission financially.

We have all heard stories of wealthy Evangelical churches that insist that each of its members tithe 10% of their income. When it was brought up in Vestry two yeas ago, we were all reluctant to set a sum or a percentage figure on our giving. It never seems to sit well with Episcopalians that we would do something like that, because we think of our giving as something private between ourselves and God.

So when the Archdeacon arrived last Tuesday, November 14 and told us the Vestry that as a parish we have to grow in maturity when it comes to Stewardship, I for one, was deeply shocked. I was also amazed that he was unimpressed that in the three years of this ministry pledges have nearly doubled.

Howard’s complaint is that we only have 52 pledges for a congregation of 250. He was unimpressed that 52 pledges represent over 100 people or families.

Over the years, you expect Archdeacons and Diocesan Treasurers to come harping about money and Stewardship, especially when you have just asked them for a grant to fix the roof. However, what happened next, surprised even me when the Archdeacon stood up at the Diocesan Clergy Day, just two days later to introduce the speaker.

He stated to the entire gathered assembly of clergy that he had been at a parish visit a couple of nights earlier, talking about stewardship, when they came out with a couple of old ‘chestnuts’ such as: “we have a lot of old members” and “we have many people on fixed incomes.”

Both statements surprised me, because I couldn’t remember anyone of the Vestry saying them. But what came next almost had me fall off my chair. The Archdeacon told the clergy: “I always find it strange that people will cry poverty, because when I crossed the car park I noticed there was not a single car more than three years old.”

The Rev. William J. McGinty, Rector  
110 West Catharine Street, Milford, Pennsylvania 18337  
Phone: (570) 296-8123 ♦ Fax: (570) 296-4383

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I was so mad I wanted to jump up, wave my car keys and shout: “Archdeacon anytime you want to swap cars with me just hand over your car keys.”

Instead I stayed quiet but late that night I sat down and quietly composed a letter to the Archdeacon which I would like to read to you:

Dear Archdeacon,

I was extremely saddened that you said to the entire body gathered for Clergy Day on November 16: “I was at one of my parish visits just the other night when some old chestnuts came up about Stewardship. One, that ‘we have old members’ and the other that we ‘have people on fixed incomes,’ yet, I noticed in the car park there was not one car older than three years.’

We regard a meeting between the Archdeacon of the Diocese of Bethlehem and this Vestry as being both confidential and a sacred trust. Certainly, we allowed you to make the remark about the cars on November 14, even though it was not true. First, we do not have a car park and the majority of the cars on W. Catharine belong to the Firehouse.

We are further saddened that you felt you could either joke at our expense, or make a point about Stewardship using us as an example. We told you at the meeting that our pledge amount went up nearly 100% over a three year period. However you chose to dismiss that statistic.

We deem our relationship with the diocese extremely important to us. However, we are not prepared in future to meet with you, if you are not prepared to respect the sacred trust we place in Bishop Paul and his representatives.

The fact that you did not refer to us by name, is neither here nor there. The reference to a couple of days ago and the fact everyone reads the Diocesan Calendar, was to us reprehensible. Words are at times like feathers in the wind. Once they are out there, it is hard to gather them back in. Perhaps this will be an object lesson for all of us, that the least said about these meetings the better. Yours sincerely...

As reluctant as I am to “tell off” an Archdeacon, maybe there are a few things about Stewardship that he needs to learn about us. In turn, in repeating them, we remind ourselves how important stewardship is to us as a community.

We have always placed the choice and responsibility for “giving” upon the individual. Every family and member of the church is more than capable of making a determination as to how much they can afford to pledge in any one year. It is a part of our covenant with God.

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As a church we ask our members to pledge for no other reason than to help the Treasurer know how much money she can rely on to pay the church's bills, in the year ahead.

As a community this church and its members have responded to the challenge of Stewardship and what it means. In the last three years we have raised our pledges and given more, because we have challenged ourselves to grow as a parish and as a ministry.

This year I would like to reach out to everyone who has not yet reached the point of pledging. Pledging is designed to make your contribution to God's work easier. It provides you with envelopes for each week of the year. It allows you to mail in your offering, even when you are in Virginia or Florida, it allows you to budget your contribution for the year. Rich or poor, we all get to make our offering to God, and ask for his blessing in our work, family and enterprises in the coming year.

This year, as in previous years I remind you, that it is hard to give to God without that gift returning us 10 fold. God blesses us and showers us with his gifts on a daily basis. If we all had equal faith in believing that, we would grow this church in a way it has never been grown before.

It is extremely tempting to tell ourselves that, parish, ministry and good liturgy should not be all about money. I know there are some of you who hate us talking about money, "giving" and even Stewardship.

For many years in this parish money and our responsibilities to the future and to future generations, was rarely talked about. When we painted the trim last year we were told: "This building has only been painted twice before in 90 years." Isn't maintaining this building all about Stewardship?" The roof on our church should have been replaced in 1971. Isn't that Stewardship? Our plumbing has cost us 10 thousand dollars in the last 12 months. Isn't that Stewardship? The Stewardship that I am asking of you today and in the coming year, is the Stewardship that has not been requested these last 40 years. I am asking you to pick up the Cross of Christ and raise it high so that it may witness to many.

Nor can any one of us, Maryann and I included, say: "Oh there are people in the church with much greater incomes than me, let them do it." God is not talking to other people, he is talking to us. Nor does he want us to allow others to carry the burden for us, he wants us to pick up and carry our own cross. That is one cross we should be prepared to carry with honor and pride.

Last year of the 82 thousand we pledged, 30 thousand was given by three people, which means the other 49 of us pledged 1061 dollars or 10 dollars per week.

I tell you that, because I know you love this church and our life of prayer and liturgy together. This is your church, this is our home where you baptize your children, have your

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daughters married and the place you come to rest when God calls you from this life. This year I for one, do not want someone else to carry my cross for me. Now that 'the gravy train has stopped,' and that in Nancy, Kathy, Hank, Barbara and our bookkeeper Cathie McNanna, we have the best possible Finance team, I want to do all in my power to give to God and his church all I can, to make his Gospel come alive in this place.

If each of us resolves to do this together, in this pledge drive, we will take ownership of the Stewardship of this parish, today and into the future. We will care for our shut-ins and those who are not well off and live alone. And each of us can say:

"Today I made a covenant with my God, because I saw my Lord, struggling to carry that cross up that hill, and I stopped to help him carry it.

And Jesus the Lord promises us: "When you did it for the least of your brothers and sisters you did it for me."

Amen+

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