

14 Pentecost
September 6, 2009
Fr. Bill McGinty

Stewardship

We have come to that time in the year where members begin to prepare for the Annual meeting, the budget for 2010 is got ready and we go of in October to Convention.

Before any of that can happen, we have our Stewardship Pledge Drive. Pledge Sunday begins today and I am instructed by your vestry to preach the Annual Stewardship sermon. Over the next four weeks, Fran Hlavacek and her team will be hard at work on the pledge drive convincing all of us of the necessity of giving back to God from what he has given to us.

She will tell us that our canons spell out the definition of a member in good standing in the Episcopal Church as one who: “attends and receives communion on a regular basis and supports the ministries of the church through their giving.”

Yet in this year’s stewardship literature, Fran does not stop there. Instead, she talks of her deep love for this church and what it has meant in her life. The church is a focal point and a beacon or many people in our community who are in need, or have reached a crisis point or themselves feel the need to give.

Six years ago when we first began to work for the recovery of this church and parish, we decided that we would open our doors and extend our ministry and the Gospel to our entire Tri-state community. Whether it was the nursing homes, the hospitals, the prison, aids awareness, or Safe Haven we knew that this was a non-Episcopalian audience and that there would be little or no return for us in fiscal terms or membership. But, we still thought it a good idea. It was a gospel thing to do and on the whole we continue to be glad that we did it. Bring a church that gives to the community-has the thrill you feel when you were first called to respond to the Gospel.

“We are going to grow the church.” We told this to ourselves over and over. Each year the Lord has continued to bless us in so many ways. Listing the number of good things that have happened to us is tiring. It is hard to sit down and record the long list of benefits that are the fruits of the work of this church and individuals within it.

It is a witness, a prayer center, a family, a refuge, a food pantry, a child care and so much more to so many people.

Linda Troise complains that from 9am the doorbell never ceases ringing. The telephone calls are constant and the needs of the many outweigh the ability of secretaries and staff to

respond. The parish has become a hive of activity throughout the week and the calendar or September, October and November is filling up at a furious rate.

This is not a parish that is dying but a parish that is living. It has a spirit that speaks of development and growth, nothing can stop God's work or the Holy Spirit except: If we say to ourselves, yes I love the spirit of this church and the fellowship of this parish; I just don't want to pay for it. I do not want to participate in its stewardship. Someone else can do that. To be a steward of good shepherd and st John the Evangelist is to have the words good shepherd written on your heart and to be convinced in your own mind: "I do not just love this church, I own it. I have ownership here in this place. This is my church from birth till death, my blood runs in its walls and the sweat of my work and toil will support it all my days."

Over those six years we have grown in ministry and numbers, but we have not grown in stewardship. If we had grown in stewardship as in other ministries, the success that we have experienced as a parish would be even greater. Instead, the struggle to balance the budget and to make payroll is a constant source of anxiety for treasurer and bookkeeper alike. As a parish, we deserve better and we as clergy, vestry and congregation we know deep in our hearts, that it is both within our power to change it; and to remedy the financial situation of the parish, if we lived up to our stewardship with God.

"The renewal of your pledge," says Fran, "means you have listened to the invitation of Jesus to follow him. You have made God number one in your life, by sharing your time, talent and treasure with your church family."

People constantly have asked me over the last six years "What do you think is a fair and reasonable pledge for a pretty average household per week?" For 5 years, I have been reluctant to tell them, but no longer. I think 40-50 dollars (a week) is a fair and minimal sum. Unless you are a senior on a limited income. Maryann and I try to set an example and we will increase that by \$5 this year. Anytime I see less, I am saddened that we have not, despite all the blessings and growth, we have not been able to convince people of the wonderful thing giving and stewardship can be in your life. I really don't buy it when we say we love the church but we refuse to support it financially. There is something wrong with that equation. I have a treasurer and a vestry who worked so hard to keep the parish solvent in the last year, I believe their work, and effort as well as my own deserves your support.

"Those who are generous are blessed," says our first reading today. James in his letter tells the Christians in today's 2nd reading: "that it is okay to say you have faith, but good works are better because they show the depth and quality of your faith."

Jesus in the Gospel blesses the faith of the Syro-phoenician woman and her daughter is restored to her.

In our lives, too we know that healing and blessing only work when our hearts are pure and we are motivated, not by self interest but by the love that is in our hearts. Stewardship is an act of love and we should see it that way.

“Ephphatha” says Jesus to the deaf dumb man. “Be opened.” We too must be open to God’s providence and trust in him that he does and will care for us.

Amen+