

## Stewardship

"Abundance." The dictionary lists one definition of "abundance" as "an ample quantity." But it also lists "a relative degree of plentifulness" – and that definition raises the subjective matter of perspective! By comparison to many, many people in the rest of the world, Americans have abundance – beginning with the quality of our daily lives because there are not bombs falling from the air or hostile people in the next village. When we turn on a tap we get clean, drinkable water; when we approach an intersection of heavy traffic, people (usually) comply with the traffic lights that are present, making for a measure of order and safety. And we are repeatedly assured of the abundance of God's love and care for us, and of the always-present Holy Spirit. But by comparison to what TV and slick magazine advertising suggests, by comparison with expectations we develop or dreams we have, we may or may not feel we have abundance. And certainly the perspectives we have these days, as our financial situation changes daily, render our hold on a sense of abundance a moving target. The comparative aspect of abundance makes it not so easy to assume, and so for today I am going to set it aside.

I'd like to begin by thinking about the idea of stewardship itself. Contrary to what word-association might say, stewardship **ISN'T** an October campaign at church! Stewardship is tending to; it is caring for; it is **an ATTITUDE**; it is part of us all the time, not just in October. The outcome of stewardship reflects the way that resources are tended, the way they are nurtured and cared for. Sometimes we are intentional about it; sometimes we are oblivious; sometimes we allow our intentions to be set aside, or fall aside, for a time and then realize we need to reclaim them. If we look at the familiar parable of the Prodigal Son, we see that one son's stewardship of his resources was wanton and careless and entirely self directed, whereas the stewardship of those at home was such that a fatted calf, robes, and a ring were available when they were wanted. (We'll leave the other major lesson of that story – the relationships among the participants –for a different discussion.)

What are the resources that we do or don't tend? The classic three are "time, talent, and treasure." That is such a tossed-off phrase -- let's break it apart a little: Our resources include these: our time – our 24 golden hours a day, each set with 60 diamond minutes; our abilities, both given and learned; our wealth; our bodies, both health and

energy; our property; our relationships with family and friends and God; our church, both as communal nurturer of our own relationship with God, and as avenue in which we can tend and care for others. As we consider the ways we use all these precious resources, we can see that these ways, intentional or unintentional, reflect our values – our values of caring, duty, generosity, joy, possessions, responsibility for self, responsibility on behalf of others, self-gratification, spiritual groundedness, survival..... these are listed in alphabetical order and there are many more to add, but I hope you can see what I am using them to illustrate.

So to sum up so far, I see stewardship as an attitude that is always a part of us, that shows in the way that we care for our resources, and that (usually at least) reflects our values. This is one way, and probably an OK way, to look at the conversation that we always have at this time of year, but so far it is in the **abstract**. Let's make it more **real**.

A few years ago I attended a workshop about stewardship presented by Bruce Rockwell of The Episcopal Network for Stewardship. Bruce was a very personable speaker who began by describing

in dramatic and illuminating terms a major conversion experience in his life. He had been a banker, so his bishop thought he would be a perfect person to head up a diocesan project that involved money. Bruce described how, in the early phase of that project, he had an epiphany! He perceived that the reason the church struggles with money issues, & loyal church people struggle with money issues, is because of the dichotomy between THE MARKETPLACE and GOD'S HOUSEHOLD. Think about it: the marketplace is oriented by scarcity, by gathering and keeping, by counting, by "me" and "mine" (two words that are learned early as we grow up). God's Household is marked by abundance, by loaves & fishes making plenty for all, by joyful giving, by the assurance of care for us greater than that for the birds of the air and lilies of the field, by the promise of relationship such that "nothing can separate us from the love of God!" Bruce's sharing of his epiphany helped me to understand why so many of us struggle each October with making a financial commitment to St. John's. We can hear and read scripture; we can hear the excellent and illuminating sermons we are blessed to receive from Fr. Mark and Mo Robyn; and we can feel the pull and the joy of being in our community of faith; but then we return home to balance our checkbooks and keep our needs and wishes within our incomes, and we soon feel the

pull into the market place. The blessings of our church and the vision of how we want it to grow begin to recede under the pressure everyday demands.

For those who have had a genuine spiritual conversion experience there are fewer struggles, or maybe even none. Mother Teresa, and people like her, have relinquished the market place completely and are oriented entirely within God's household. Those deeply rooted in the tradition of tithing, of pledging 10% to God's work, need only to do a simple mathematic calculation. But probably most of us today feel ourselves to be BOTH people of the market place AND people of God's household. Our stewardship task, then, is to perceive the tension that can exist between these two worlds and then to act intentionally to reconcile that tension in a way that responds to the best of each.

So now our abstract stewardship idea has become a real and understandable dilemma. Next let's be **practical!** When our "ships" are riding high the reconciling is easier; when we know that our ships are riding lower, the reconciling is harder. But when we are, as now, beset with anxiety about how the storm will play out; when we daily see the

market place gloom in the media and feel it at our workplaces; when we look at our expectations being assaulted by pension failure and job loss and mortgage defaults; when the intricacies of the economics become so complex that we can only barely understand, and we have no individual ability to affect the chaos or outcome; when we add the possibility of unexpected personal illness or accident – in the face of all this our reaction can easily be to “hunker down” and protect as much as we can using the avenues that are most entrenched in our psyches. We feel a pressing need to be able to continue “to put food on the table”.

The question before us though, even in these difficult times, is – what food will there be on the table at the church? How can we, **in faithfulness**, balance the need for effective stewardship in God’s household with the need for effective stewardship in our own households? Can we commit to sharing some of our abilities, things we do well, so that in some new way the ministries at St. John’s will be increased outside of the financial system? (Note: the key word here is “commit!” Without commitment our offering becomes intermittent, and ministry is difficult to sustain.) But even the best commitment of time and ability cannot entirely replace cold cash. So here we are at

realities and hard decisions. How **DO** we manage this straddle??...specifically, **HOW?**

Perhaps we can take an initial clue from a Gospel lesson: the well-known "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's". Notice that this injunction includes **BOTH** worlds **within** the budget; the marketplace is not the only claimant. Translating this to our current discussion, I believe it calls us to **include** St. John's in the intentional stewardship of our resources; to recognize that the presence of food on St. John's table is as important to us and our community as the presence of food on our own table is to our household; to realize that St. John's is important to each of us as a means for us to offer our gifts for God's work in our world; it calls us therefore to hold St. John's within our values and priorities, and not give it only our leftovers, our extra. Please note here something that is especially important: What I have just said – "that we need to include St. John's in the intentional stewardship of our resources" – does **NOT** mean any of us is **individually** responsible for keeping all of the food on St. John's table, but rather that if each of us does our part as best we can, there will be food!

We are still left with the question of how we do this, especially in this time of fewer resources. This is where the going gets tough, isn't it? What, specifically, are ways in which we can meet this challenge? At this point, I am going to put out a few ideas, and then I am going to quit and trust we can join together in a discussion.

Parroting from proposals heard from politicians, one way would be to "impose an across the board cut" on all categories of our spending, and then live within that result. While that is an easy approach, it is probably not easy to carry out because not all of our spending categories will be able to be lowered. Perhaps it would be more fruitful to look at those 3 things you listed as being genuinely grateful for, take a **deep** breath and **feel the REALITY of appreciation** for their presence in your life - and then, armed with some sense of blessing, move on to other approaches.

I liked the suggestion in one of Fr. Mark's sermons that we use our time in this wilderness to discern whether we really need ice - or latte, or any Starbucks for that matter - or anything else to which we perceive we have become accustomed over the past few years. Obviously these things may not exist at all for some of us, and they will certainly be different for all of us. Clearly

eliminating some of them - and some of them regularly, especially several of them regularly - will have an impact on the resources we have available with which to make intentional commitments. Taking this idea further, it might be time to take a serious look at the categories from which we are spending. We might be able to divide them into two parts, one being for essentials and one being for choices, and look at whether whole categories of non-essential choice can be eliminated, at least for a time. Even essential categories can be evaluated to see whether their amounts can be decreased. These are just some of the possible ways I can think of to approach exercising good stewardship in today's financial turbulence.

Now I am going to stop and ask **you** - how you look at this circumstance? How do **you** approach your opportunity to pledge some of your resources to God's work at St. John's Church?

Thank you again for reading this, and for sharing your self and your perspectives on the important challenge facing each of us, namely how to respond with intention to the competing claims of this year's unstable and presently gloomy market place vs. the abundance of energy and potential that lies in St. John's church and its Strategic Mission Plan goals. May God be in our hearts and

minds as we go forth to consider seriously our stewardship of our resources!