

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

The Rev. Robert G. Eaton, Interim Rector
All Saints' Episcopal Church, San Diego, CA

As much as we make announcements and provide notices with references to donations of quite a variety, and talk about our fundraising successes in celebration, and then during the fall, focused around appropriate scripture, talk about regular giving in tithes and offerings, we rarely teach and preach about the topic of before you die, planning a living bequest from your estate to an endowment fund for the benefit of the Body of Christ

I'm going to do that today, and ground it accordingly in who God is as the ultimate provider of legacy and endowment.

O lord, let your word only be spoken and your word only be heard. Amen.

A teaching legacy that came from the third Bishop of San Joaquin, Bishop Victor Rivera, was his very oft repeated meme about three books. He would say that, as Christians, the very essence of being a good Episcopalian meant being very familiar in the knowledge and regular use of three divine books: the books of the Bible, the Prayer Book, and the Check book. Of course, these days people don't hardly know what is a check book. So perhaps if he were alive today the good bishop would refer to the three apps of the good Episcopalian: the Bible app, the Prayer Book app, and your online banking app.

Whether check book or online banking app, the bishop would go on to make reference to the ways we see financial stewardship, making use of the scripture, and seeing "right now" stewardship, and legacy stewardship which is in a sense deferred stewardship for a lasting legacy of the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ, in both word and deed.

A word we hear in the epistle to James today, besides giving, is the word endowment. We can key off that word to talk about something that is very important for our consideration, prayer, and planning.

Before I get to those theological instructions from James, let's define three basic categories of financial giving for the church: first, regular week by week giving, as in our tithes and pledges, as God has called us to do, and seeing in such self-sacrifice and care for the needs of daily ministry, and the ongoing proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ; second, designated or undesignated giving for special projects such as when people in this parish gave for the bell tower and dome, or the addition and remodeling to add much needed restrooms, or the current project of the memorial and flower garden for which additional funds are needed to complete, or perhaps when you take on the construction of that 6 level parking structure across the street – three levels up, and three levels underground, but again as enhancement for

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ministry, worship, and proclamation of the Good NEWS; and finally a third area, planned giving as a gift of legacy, properly placed in an endowment which, with proper and watchful stewards, grows and thus continues to provide for future needs as we take the whole of the church into consideration, and be prepared as God may call us into new areas of ministry and proclamation.

Just stating those three gives you something to think and pray about, doesn't it.

For each of these areas, the teaching from the scripture is the same. It's just three different ways that giving can be identified. As with the teaching to the early Christian church in and around Jerusalem, You can find these same three areas of giving in the life and teaching of the Jewish people in general, Jesus himself refining these teachings.

For instance, in Luke chapter 8 we read of a general operations purse provided by certain women of means who followed Jesus, Judas being the treasurer. And in planning for the immediate future, there are the temple storerooms where the grain tithes are brought and kept for later use. Or even the provision for the Temple itself, an enormous task and cost.

Today, making use of the epistle of James, I want you to hear some very basic teaching on Giving. Just To underscore legacy or future giving once more, let me say that just as an annual pledge worked out in weekly and monthly giving is a chance to return to God a portion of our yearly income, a planned gift into endowment funds provides a long-term legacy that will continue to support the church for generations. Our current endowment/legacy, and the one I hope you will take seriously into your prayer planning, is one of the resources given to us by God to serve God and our neighbors. It has been built by the gifts of faithful church members in this parish over many years to strengthen the work of the church. We give grateful thanks for their consideration.

It is simply a wise thing to make such financial plans for your loved ones, and then for the sake of God's Kingdom through the church. You might be surprised to know, as I was when I first heard this a few years ago there are now 1.2 million non-profits competing for our time and money—an increase of 33% in the last ten years. The local church is, if you will, "competing" with other institutions— colleges, hospitals, civic centers, etc.—not to mention so many worthy, worthy even life-saving causes like the American Cancer Society. My point is not about envy. It's that all these organizations have professional staff whose primary function is development (that is, fundraising) - while very few churches have anyone assigned to this task training our parishioners how to gift the church through Bequests Under Will, Charitable Trust, Direct Gifts, Stocks, and Bonds, Insurance Policies, and real estate. What every parish must do then is train those who can assist. In my estimation you have here at All Saints a very capable group of parishioners, as well as our Business Administrator, , who understand endowments and planned giving. They are not paid professional development staffers. But, they have the capability of assisting you with information with your planned giving, thus helping our parish increase the financial storehouse of future ministry.

I think you understand, then, the concept of planned giving, of the endowment, of bequests, of legacy, considering the children who do and will grace this parish, our grandchildren, and this parish being there for them.

I invite you to consider making your legacy giving plans, no matter how large or small, for the endowing of ministry in the future through this parish.

I do realize, with a little trepidation, that money, and teaching and preaching about it, can be pastoral quicksand. Dwight L. Moody once said that standing just beside the ministry martyrs in heaven will be the ministry fundraisers. It has always been quite the challenge that American pastors face in preaching on money to history's wealthiest Christians. Someone has said that the most sensitive nerve in the body is the one going from the heart to the wallet. Sometimes there is recoil.

But Jesus taught and preached about it almost more than anything else. So how can the preacher of Jesus' word not talk of it.

So the rest of what I want to preach about today is look at one instance in the Word of God to bring some wisdom and teaching regarding the proper foundation of holy giving.

Here now we turn to James' letter, which you can follow along in your service booklet.

James 1:17-27 RSV-CE2 He wrote,

¹⁷ “Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.”

¹⁸ “Of his own will He brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.”

The phrase “good endowment” refers to giving, and is often translated as “every generous act of giving”. One way or the other it gives us pause to see that these two words of giving and gift in verse 17 are from two different Greek words. One refers to the one who is giving, and thus bestowing, or as you can hear, endowing, and the other word refers to the gift itself.

This is a foundation of the theology of giving. This difference between giver and gift refers to a much wider understanding of what God has to offer us, and, in contrast, what we cannot offer in comparison when the light is on US when WE are the givers. God is good. His gifts are good. It is his nature to give. We cannot claim the same. We are fallen creatures, so even redeemed, our giving is suspect.

Still, the calling is to go and do likewise, and so we act accordingly in the same way as God has acted toward us. He has given the opportunity, as the steward of salvation, for each of us to not only live today in his grace, but to have this endowment of living with him for ever and ever. We become ourselves Redeemed Gifts, learning while in this world to give as freely as he for someone else's benefit. We become God's endowment.

And what a blessing it is that his free and abundant giving does not depend upon OUR character.

We can learn from this lesson that the most optimum of gifts to each other, and even to God himself, can be redeemed and thus made holy, as they are given through the mercy and imitation of Christ himself. And as recipients by faith of this legacy gift of eternal life, we are the first fruits of the work of Jesus Christ who died on the cross and was risen. And just as in the two words for giving, being the first fruits not only refers to our new identity in Christ, but it also spells out that it is God's intention while we are still here on earth to share such first fruits with all those around us. We become, as well, good stewards. It is both identity and calling, and in that there is hope for our giving. In his death, Jesus released His gift of love for all and could not take it back. It is the redemption of an act of self-giving. In the same way, our redeemed money as a gift to the church will be understood to be that personal sacrifice of love released to God's kingdom. Here we must be careful and strive for being those good stewards, holy first fruits. To not make that release can be spiritually disastrous to you, and even in the hands of those who have received the gift without the release of that ownership, the gift feels no longer like a gift to the church or to whomever has received it, but more like an albatross.

It's the ball of string you toss to someone, but you haven't let go of your end of the string. How far is that gift going to go? Where is the future of legacy in that? Just when the recipient, as in the Church, begins to make use of that ball of string, they get snapped back because it has yet to be freely given. Call that ownership not really given.

The action of Faith as Salvation that James will talk about is exactly in the planning and the release of how you give. In fact it is the proof of faith. James said,²² "But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves." Give, do not hold back, "do good" he said, if nothing else as a sign of your faith in God in action.....and then as already said release your hands from it.

Just think if this sense of selfish giving had been the way that Jesus tried to bring healing. Better yet, just look at the stories of healing. Nowhere does Jesus provide the legacy of a healing for their lives, and then say to them, "And now you owe me." Surely we do. But the gift of life in healing is provided as it is, a gift. this is Jesus being exactly, in his nature as God, the good steward of all good gifts for our benefit in love.

Here is the foundation of how and why WE are to give in any capacity and for any reason.

Keeping in mind that life is fragile, and surprisingly short, there is the opportunity only right before us of gladdening the hearts of those who will travel the life of Christ after we are gone!! as well as our regular offerings. It is the thoughtful and planned giving for the longer duration, keeping in mind the needs of our church children and their life in this congregation as they too grow up in the Lord.

So let us be swift to love as givers of good and lasting gifts, and make haste to be kind to those who will come after us. God loves such sacrifices and nurture.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.