

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany – Year B
January 31, 2021
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- SERMON -

As you know, we are coming to the end of our stewardship program. That's the time of year when we ask our members to think about what they are giving to the church and consider what they will give over the next year.

And for those of you who are new to our church services, no, we don't talk about giving "all the time". But once a year we DO talk about it. I believe it's important to talk about it for several reasons.

But before we get into that, I do want to share a story about one church service (not one of ours) which was under way and they passed the collection plate. When the pastor saw a \$100.00 bill in the collection plate, he stopped the service and announced, "Who ever put the \$100.00 bill in the plate please stand up".

An attractive single woman stood up and said, "I did."

The pastor told her, "Since you put that much money in the plate, I would like to let YOU pick out three hymns." Excitedly, the woman said, "How nice, I'll take him and him and him!"

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So, you're probably sitting there thinking, "Here it comes. She just told us she's going to talk about giving, and she gave us a cute little story to get us relaxed, so now she's gonna' tell us that we need to give our money because God needs it, so He can do His work in the world."

Well, I'm not going to tell you that. Instead, I'm going to tell you that... God doesn't NEED your money because everything belongs to Him already.

In our reading this morning the Apostle Paul had written to the Corinthians, "...yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live." So, everything came FROM God THROUGH Jesus Christ.

Everything we have come from Him.

So, why do we give? And how much should we give?

This is where it gets uncomfortable, doesn't it? It reminds me of the story of when a Sunday School Teacher, who had been teaching about missionaries, asked her eight eager 10-year-olds if they would give \$1,000,000 to the missionaries.

"YES!" they all shouted!!

"Would you give \$1,000?" Again, they shouted "YES!"

"How about \$100?" "Oh, YES we would!" they all agreed!!

"Would you give just a dollar to the missionaries?" she asked.

The boys exclaimed, "YES!" just as before, except for Johnnie.

"Johnnie," the teacher said as she noticed the boy clutching his pocket, "why didn't you say 'YES' this time?"

"Well," he stammered, "I HAVE a dollar."

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Before we get too far into the subject of giving and tithing, it must be acknowledged that this past year has been a very different year for all of us. There have been many hardships – physically, emotionally and financially. These things need to be taken into consideration. Also, if questions about giving affects a loved one, you may want to discuss this with them – prayerfully, asking for God's guidance.

Did you know that the Old Testament talks of many different kinds of tithes? They included NON-monetary wealth like grain and wine and oil? You've probably heard of the "firstfruits." For instance, in Leviticus it says, "A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord; it is holy to the Lord."

So, if tithing includes things besides finances, what do we give? And how much?

All of that being said, I'd like to share something with you...

How many of you have seen The Lord of the Rings? There is a scene in which Gandalf introduced Pippin to the Lord Denethor of the Realm of Gondor. Gandalf says of Denethor that he has forgotten that he is but a steward, placed in charge until the return of the king. "The real question for tithing is the one underlying Gandalf's description of Lord Denethor:

"How much of the personal wealth over which I am but steward can I morally justify keeping for myself?"

I'll repeat the question, "How much of the personal wealth over which I am but steward can I morally justify keeping for myself?"

Brother Randall D. Horton, who was House Manager at Fessenden House in New York was speaking of this and said, “Now, that question changes the dynamic considerably. In fact, it changes the dynamic to that of the traditional monastic notion of poverty. Monks do not ask, “How much do I owe?” but, “How much do I really NEED to keep?”

The old canon of the Mass does not say, “And here we present unto thee 10 percent of ourselves, 10 percent of our souls, 10 percent of our bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, living sacrifice unto thee.”

But it does say, “And here we present unto thee ourselves, our souls and our bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, living sacrifice unto thee.”

We do not owe God 10 percent of anything; we owe God 100 percent.

The first question (“How much do I owe?”) is based upon the assumption that we ourselves are responsible for “making” the wealth we have been given, that it “belongs” to us; however, the second question (“How much do I really NEED to keep?”) is based upon the assumption that God created everything that is, including our wealth, and we are but stewards of it until the return of the king – our king.

So, with all of that being said, whatever monies we are led to give, (be it 2%, 5%, 10% or whatever) our next questions is: Why should I consider Church of the Good Shepherd?

Whatever church or organization I give of my time, finances or talents, I would want it to be one in which I feel I can trust how they manage these gifts and will they be used to honor God. My experience in this parish over the last seven years now (beginning January 2014), Church of the Good Shepherd has shown they can be trusted in both of these two areas.

Through 2020 bills and salaries were paid, funds spent on Outreach, Mission & Ministry programs were just under \$107,000. Our Rector’s Discretionary Fund paid utility bills of over \$37,000 to those in our parish and throughout the community. All of this without having to touch our endowment fund. Our church members volunteered 8,222 hours in our various ministries – ministries outside the church in the community, filling so many needs. I hate to begin listing these, because there are so many.

Those of you here at Church of the Good Shepherd have a loving, caring, generous heart. And you work together. You listen to each other. And you care.

Those of you watching from outside the church online and participating in Zoom meetings because you can’t be here, your prayers are heard.

So, there you have it.

As we prayerfully consider what God is asking of us as individuals, may we as a church, as members of the Body of Christ, Grow in Generosity and be Rooted in Faith. Faith in our Lord

Jesus Christ through whom all things are made. And Lord, may we “present unto thee ourselves, our souls and our bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, living sacrifice unto thee.”

Amen.

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