

A sermon preached by
The Rev. Dr. Cathy L. Deats
at St. James' Episcopal Church
November 17, 2002
Proper 28 Year A – Matthew 25:14-29

Inspired by the movie *Pay It Forward*, a Southern California church gave away \$10,000 one Sunday just before Thanksgiving two years ago, and told the recipients, in turn, to give the money to good causes and needy people. Denny Bellesi, pastor of Coast Hills Community Church in Aliso Viejo, didn't expect the response—or the press coverage—this planned act of kindness received. "We thought it was just going to be our little church," Bellesi says, "and now it's gone everywhere."

The \$10,000 giveaway was a lesson on stewardship. "What would people do if they stopped to realize, 'This isn't my money'?" Bellesi wondered. He preached on the parable of the talents and distributed the cash. His twist on this enacted parable was that afterward he didn't want a penny back. During the services, the pastor randomly chose 100 people and handed each one a \$100 bill. He also issued three rules: "Recognize this isn't your money; it belongs to the Master. Invest it in people's lives outside of this church body; we don't want the money back. And ninety days from now, tell us what happened."

For many, deciding how to "pay forward" the \$100 wasn't easy. Some tossed and turned at night. Many found themselves in prayer. Most tell amazing stories: One man wrote his college friends from thirty years ago and shared his idea. With their contributions, his \$100 turned into \$11,000—enough to fund two missionaries in Africa for a year. A woman wanted to use her money to buy storybooks for a children's hospital. When a client at work heard of her plan, he volunteered to help. "I own a warehouse full of children's books," he said. "Come, take all you need."

"The unchurched world is sick and tired of hearing from the church," Bellesi says. "I think they want to see something. 'Is Christianity real? *Show us.*'"¹

The pastor had wondered, "What would people do if they stopped to realize, 'This isn't my money'?" What, indeed, would be our response to truly realizing that nothing we have, including our very lives, is anything but a gift from a loving and gracious God? That means the earth and all its beauty and fullness; our entire lives, including our bodies; our time, every year and day and hour we have; our skills and abilities, finances, relationships. What would be our response if we, like the people in today's parable, were holding such valuable gifts in trust for our Master?

As John McKinney told us last week, a steward holds someone else's belongings in trust. Being a steward is not just a baby-sitting job; it was not enough for one of the stewards in today's gospel to simply watch over the master's assets. A steward is to be someone with a sense of accountability and responsibility, and a close identification with the Master, the owner. A steward is an instrument of blessing, someone chosen by the Master to use the Master's wealth in the name of the Master, and to create and multiply the blessing brought about by the Master's assets. The responsible steward takes his or her role seriously, and values the Master more than the gifts.

What we really value, what we really care about, makes demands on us, doesn't it? In the wake of a huge disaster like the destruction of the World Trade Center, many of us looked again at our lives. A month after September 11th, the media was featuring

stories on individuals and families who had been shaken up spiritually, had been shocked into taking stock of their lives and taking action. For Cindy Waarsdorp, a forty-something real estate agent, September 11th drove home the reality that tomorrow is not guaranteed and that retirement may never come. So she works fewer hours, taking more time out for friends and doing things she likes, such as going to concerts. One family living in the suburbs of Manhattan pulled up stakes and moved to a less expensive rural area, giving up their large house for a smaller one and the dad's high-pressure, long-hours job for a lower-paying one. Another couple, engaged for a year and planning a wedding another year in the future, married in four weeks instead, stating in their invitation that they realized they wanted to trade their much dreamed-for though planning-intense wedding to begin their marriage relationship together with more time for each other and less pressure.

We don't have to wait to be shocked into evaluating whether our true priorities are being honored by our behavior. A simple look at our checkbooks and appointment books will tell us all we need to know. We all have living expenses that for the most part don't change. And most of us can find the money necessary for the most important things to us, whether that is airfare to visit grandchildren, season tickets to plays or sports, clothing or computer stuff, CDs or books or Christmas gifts. We all have varying amounts of money; how we use it is up to us. It is not that any of these things are poor choices; it is how these choices reflect our priorities. For me, when I did my first exercise of proportional giving many years ago, I was shocked to find that I spent more on clothing (when I had sufficient clothing, I might add) than what I gave to my church.

We all have the same number of hours in each day; how we fill them is up to us. There are 112 waking hours in each week, assuming we sleep eight hours a night. Most of us here spend from one to two hours per week at St. James' on Sundays; others spend double that, if they attend other worship or Bible study, or are members of the choir. Your vestry members, wardens and treasurer spend an average of another hour per week meeting as a body, as well as chairing or being members of other committees. Imagine the impact we could have on the community and God's work from this place if we were to commit a percentage of our time, in proportion to the time we are given, to St. James. Statistics say the average American spends 14.3 hours per week watching television. What would happen if each of us took one hour of that TV time per week and used it to work on a Mission Strategy project or study God's word or even to pray and meditate, asking God for direction for our lives and the life of this community?

But lest you think that you can add even a half an hour a week to your schedule without giving up something, let me add that it cannot be done without sacrifice. The family who moved out of the suburbs after 9-11 traded a four-bedroom home on an acre of land for a two-bedroom home farther from the city. The breadwinner took a lower paying job. The family could not go out to dinner every week, or travel for annual vacations to Disney World. But they did have more time together as a family, the companionship of each other and less hectic lives. They found over time that they did not miss the other things as much as they thought they might. And if we want to live into our baptismal promises, it will take sacrifice.

What we really value, what we really care about makes demands on us. Last Easter season, a newspaper carried a two-page spread of church advertisements. One ad read, "There are plenty of churches that are just after your money. We're not like that. Come and worship with us, and leave your wallet at home." In saying this, aren't

they saying that we have a religion here that really won't cost you anything? It won't ask for sacrifices or limit your life in any way. And doesn't that mean, in the end, that it doesn't really matter much at all? Ordination to the priesthood in the Episcopal Church is a long and intensive three to five-year process including education, internship in ministry, psychological testing, and interviewing by clergy and lay people of the Commission on Ministry. There are other places where you can get ordained much more easily. For example, on the Internet, visit one website and get ordained in three minutes. "We accept everyone from all faiths, beliefs and religions. No requirements or commitments EVER!" this website declares.²

If we care about something, whether it is our job, our family, or our health, we are willing to sacrifice for it. We do what is necessary to pay attention to it and we allow it to make demands on us. Faith in Jesus Christ makes demands on us. At baptism, we promise to worship God, to receive the eucharist, to pray, to be in fellowship with other Christians. So we make it a point to be present at Sunday worship, to pray daily devotions however we do that. It's not easy to say no to soccer practice or the *New York Times* and coffee in bed. We promise to keep in fellowship one with another, so here at St. James' we promise to come to the family breakfasts each month. That one's easy. We promise when we sin to repent. That one is really hard; first, it's hard to admit when we sin and then the repentance may require us to apologize or make amends. We promise to proclaim, by word and example, the Good News of God in Christ. That means we try to live so that when others see us, they know we are Christians. We promise to seek Christ in all persons, to serve Christ in all persons and to strive for justice and peace among all people. That means we see Christ in everyone, those we love easily and those with whom we struggle. That is *really* hard. I must sacrifice my being right, my privilege, my *self* for the sake of the gospel.

The St. James' Stewardship Committee has put together a package to help you examine your own role as steward of the gifts God has blessed you with. These packages were mailed this past week, and for those who may not have received one, there are extras in the narthex. We ask that you take some quiet time this week to read the material carefully. You will find that your leaders, the leaders you elected to be stewards of the business affairs of this parish, have promised to faithfully and prayerfully do the proportional giving exercise contained in it. Their pledge cards will be turned in this week, prior to the vestry meeting on Thursday. With all of your elected leaders fully committed to a financial pledge, we ask that you turn in your pledge on Harvest Home Sunday, which is next week. It will be an offering of thanksgiving that we pledge to God's work in this place. The leaders of this parish have not promised, nor do you have to promise, to increase your percentage of giving. We simply want you to know what that percentage is and prayerfully consider your stewardship of the financial gifts God has given you and your family. We then invite you to challenge yourself, to push yourself just a little, to sacrifice for this church, which I have heard described by so many of you as a "home," "a place of refuge," "a place of acceptance," "a place where I am loved." I share your love of this place, which I have been privileged to lead for a little less than a year. Now it is *our* place, and each one of us has a place here and each one of us has a responsibility here. Let us then offer ourselves to God and to each other as a sacrifice of thanksgiving.

¹ Drew Zahn, "Pay it God-ward," Leadership Journal, Spring 2001

² Universal Life Church, <http://www.ulc.org>, 10/28/02