

Lately the lectionary has been giving us some consistent and sound advice to support each other, not to cheat each other and that by helping our neighbors, we are actually creating a better world for ourselves.

I want to dive into the warning we have in our Gospel today, but I want to highlight some of the points from the past few weeks, as the scripture has been rich with good messages. The warning I heard in the reading today was one of concern for our motivations. Why do we do the things that we do? Do we do them for our love of God and out of gratitude for all we have been given? Or do we do them because we want recognition, instant gratification, honor, and the respect of other people? Do we do good so that others will be convinced we are good, or are we really trying to convince ourselves? You see, we know our own hearts. We know our sins, and sometimes I think we try and atone for our sins by doing good for others -- but sometimes, we do it where and when everyone can see it. I think motivation is fulcrum of the balance beam under our lives.

In the Gospel we have two figures, a tax collector and a Pharisee. The Pharisee is ticking off his list of things his “Good Teacher” has told him he needs to do in order to follow the law. The fact that he was proud and boastful and judged others, does not really seem to follow the spirit of the law. I think the Pharisee must have asked their teacher something like this: “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit Eternal life?” The Pharisee took the answer literally, and began checking off the boxes on his way to eternal life.

The other figure, a tax collector, enters his prayer time with humility and confesses his sins. He is beating his breast and saying, *‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.*”

I am not a Jew or a Jewish scholar, but I do read the Washington Post and Dana Milbank, a Post contributor wrote about taking a recent break from reporting on the political campaign to observe Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement. Dana wrote:

“On this day, we symbolically beat our breasts with fists as we say the Ashamnu (literally, “we are guilty”) confession: “We betray. We steal. We scorn. We act perversely. We are cruel. We scheme. We are violent. We slander. We devise evil. We lie. We ridicule. We disobey. We abuse. We defy. We corrupt...it is a road map to recovery.

*This ancient ritual is based on the concept of collective responsibility: Each of us may not have committed every sin, but we atone for all sins anyway, because we are indirectly responsible for the sins of the community. The concept comes from Deuteronomy 21:1-9: If a murder victim is found and the killer is unknown, the elders of the nearest town must perform an animal sacrifice to atone for the bloodshed. Medieval rabbis developed the concept further in the Talmud, giving us the Aramaic phrase, “*Kol yisrael arevim zeh bazeh*”: All of Israel is responsible for one another. ”*

If we look back a couple of weeks to the Gospel on the shrewd manager, and only serving one master, we can get some deeper insight on our Gospel today. Jews understand that they are one people, and they had laws that benefitted the whole community. In particular there is the law about not collecting interest on lending. The Jews knew that if the individuals in the community thrived and helped each other, then the whole community would become stronger and more vibrant. They knew that if people helped each other instead of seeking to profit off of each other, everyone benefits.

If you ask Jewish people about being Jewish – and I have – the answer they give more often than not, it that being Jewish is not so much a religion they practice, but that being Jewish is a way of life. They are all about prospering themselves, but they also understand that when everyone in the community has their needs met, and is prospering, the whole community benefits.

I think that is a really good model for us as Christians. Being a Christian should be a way of life. A way that is guided by the teachings of Jesus -- a Jew. A way of living where we love and respect each other, offer hospitality, stand up and for each other, and recognize that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, Children of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit. If we are going to succeed together, then we need to work together.

Jesus is the “Way,” and we need each other.

The ancient Jewish laws intended that we not profit from each other, but rather that we profit for each other. I am becoming increasingly convinced that greed is the largest, single cause of hatred and sin. Greed diminishes us – makes us small. The opposite of greed is generosity, and generosity grows. Generosity is catching. Acts of kindness and generosity can become contagious and that is what we should strive to achieve.

Strive to be generous, kind, and grateful -- and start now. Live generously, be kind and show gratitude in this moment and every moment to come. Love each other. Build relationships that last and support others. Respect and recognize the people in your family, workplace, school, neighborhood, and parish as potential allies. And if we all pull together, we can make the world a better place – for everyone. What we do, matters.

Doesn't that sound great? It does, but how do we do that? Where do we start?

It starts inside, in our hearts, and it requires faithfulness and it requires engagement. Our choices matter. Make mindful choices that reflect generosity and prosperity, faithfulness, and gratitude – and make them everyday.

This is Stewardship season, and as such I want to speak to you a little bit about stewardship and giving of your time, talent and money to the church. First, I want to say that Stewardship is everything we do after we say we believe. And second, when filling out your pledge card, listen to your heart.

Listen to the invitation to return a percentage of your money back to God in thanksgiving. Because there is no higher purpose than worshiping God, reaching out to the poor and needy, providing pastoral care to the lonely and suffering, passing on the faith, and maintaining a space, this building and these grounds to be here for generations to come.

Do not think of pledging as making a donation to a “good Cause” but instead, think of it as a spiritual practice.

Think about a giving campaign as being more about your need to give, than our need to receive, and I think you will experience a deep sense of joy, and true joy comes from God.

If I am going to preach about stewardship, I think I should tell you my own stewardship story. When I first moved to the DC area and started attending an Episcopal Church, I volunteered a LOT of my time teaching Sunday School, and I eventually became the Youth Minister of St. Michael's in Arlington, VA. Every week I would throw money in the collection plate. Some weeks more than

others, as I was self-employed and some weeks were frankly better than others. Then it happened, my parish priest asked me why I had not pledged. My answer was very clear. I did not see a reason to write off what I gave for taxes, as a gift to God is just that and I did not feel the need to be compensated by Uncle Sam. Furthermore, I made better money some weeks than others and tossed what was left into the plate -- every week, faithfully. I would not want to make a commitment I could not keep. My answer seemed reasonable -- at first.

Then she asked me if I expected her to be there for me when I needed her? If something happened to me, did I think someone from the parish would visit me in the hospital, bring food to my home, or, God forbid, bury me? Well, of course I answered, after all this is my church. Then she asked me if I thought it was fair for me to expect the church to commit to me when I would not commit to the church? I had never thought of it that way. I knew that I gave at least \$5 per week, usually more, and it dawned on me that committing to \$250 a year, was a fine first step. I could always pay more, I could even pay less. Confucius said, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." My journey toward tithing began with a \$5 commitment. There was a bonus -- perhaps for the first time, and in a deep and profound way I felt like I truly belonged to the parish. I had overcome my fear of commitment and gained a deeper relationship with my faith community.

A wise woman once told me that the meaning of life is that we do the best we can, and leave the rest to God. At one time, tossing my leftovers into the collection plate each week was the best that I could do. The moment I possessed a deeper understanding, I took my first step, my leap of faith.

The bottom line in my story really is that I was afraid to commit, and being afraid to commit is, I think, one of the most basic and common fears we have. Fear of commitment impacts us in making big and small decisions, and is tied to our trust in ourselves and in God. It is also tied to our manic schedules that seem to rule our lives -- feeling like one more thing with get us to the breaking point -- it is about choices. I had taken a leap of faith that led to a deeper relationship with my community and with God.

What you pledge is a question for you to consider on your own in a private conversation with God. Stewardship is everything you do after you say you believe. Today I would like you to consider how you, as a contributing member of this church have engaged in stewardship as one body. One of the beautiful things about pledging is that it makes you realize that you are really part of something bigger. If you have not done so yet, I encourage all of you to commit to this Body of Christ and fill out a pledge card.

We are the church, this building is not the church, we are the church. As the church we need to have a vision, carry out a mission, and commit ourselves to work together and make it happen. We need to come before God with Humility, to confess our sins, and then show gratitude for all that we have been given. We, the church need to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the world. And if we act as Christ in the world, we will experience a deep sense of joy in our hearts.

As my friend the Rev. Deacon Mary Beth said recently, "*We can preach and we can pray, but unless we go... we are not acting as Jesus in the world.*" In order to do the work God has given us to do, we need to listen to our hearts and give of our time, our talent and our money. Go about your days in peace, live generously and prosper, be faithful, be grateful, and as the first line from Sirach read today, "Give to the Most High as he has given to you, and as generously as you can afford." Amen