

Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17

Psalm 127

Hebrews 9:24-28

Mark 12:38-44

If you've been reading your mail lately, you've probably already discovered that it's stewardship season at St. Paul's. Just like Christmas, Easter, your birthday and tax day, it rolls around every year. Hopefully, you have received a letter from your Senior Warden, Natalie Eastman and from me. This season isn't just about the necessary funds we need to keep the doors open and our ministries going. Even more importantly, it's also about pausing for a moment to take stock of where we are as a congregation and where we are individually in terms of our spiritual development and nourishment and our relationship with God. Are we getting...and are we giving...what we need to feed our souls? That's the question that's always at the heart of any stewardship season.

Knowing that I was going to be preaching about stewardship this Sunday, I was just tickled to death when I took a look at the lectionary and discovered the readings for today. It seemed almost Providential that the story of the widow's mite should be the Gospel lesson for today. I could hardly wait to get started. This should be like shooting fish in a barrel, I thought! Piece of cake, I said to myself. And then I started reading the commentaries. They were all pretty clear...no, not pretty clear. They were decidedly clear and to the point. The story about the widow's mite is *not* about stewardship. Not even close. Just take a look. She gave *all* she had to the temple...all of it...nothing left for herself. I've often wondered who took care of her after she made this magnanimous gesture. Did she have family that took her in? Did the neighbors take it upon themselves to be sure she ate every day? Did the religious establishment step in to meet her needs as they are duty-bound to do for the poor? We don't know, but apparently, she wasn't too worried about it.

So, no, I'm not going to suggest to any of you that you put *all* that you have into the treasury at St. Paul's. That would not only be irresponsible; it would be ludicrous! And that's not about stewardship. When we think about stewardship and talk about stewardship, we're talking about making wise decisions about how and where to use the resources we have. That's good stewardship whether we're functioning together as a congregation or individually as members of that congregation. We need to figure out the best use of what God has entrusted to us. And make no mistake about it, everything we have including our very lives are gifts to us. None of it

is 'ours.' It's all been entrusted to us...just like the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the food we eat. It was all provided to us by God...for our use.

Time itself is a gift from God...and we have no idea how much time we have. There's no ledger or balance sheet for time. How do we, then, make wise decisions about what to do about the time that God has given us? How are we going to spend that? Think about how you spend your leisure time. How much of it do you have? Are you doing things with it that refresh you and restore you? Maybe you're doing something that increases your self-esteem. Perhaps that involves helping someone else or just staying in touch...by letter or text or e-mail or phone call with people that you care about. Do you love someone who is very far away? When was the last time you talked to them?

Most of us, as Christians, would say that we love God and that we love Jesus Christ. We've been told more than once that love is not just a noun...it's a verb. It has to be displayed in actions before it is of any value. Our loving words and acts of kindness are emotional food for ourselves and for others. How often do you emotionally feed someone else and by definition, get fed yourself? If you love God and you love Jesus, are you talking to them? That would be your prayer life. Do you listen for God to speak? That requires that you stop talking yourself...that you are still and are listening. Are you curious about Jesus and what he thinks? How often do you read the Bible...and then just sit and contemplate what you've read? Do you see Jesus and God differently than you did a decade ago or two decades ago? Perhaps you've gotten to know them better. How we spend our time says a lot about what our priorities are...what we think is important. Does Jesus get the best of what you have in terms of time and energy or is he an after-thought? When you have decisions to make...big or small...do you consult with God? When you have a problem to solve or something is worrying you, do you turn it over to God and wait for His solution? How many times during the day do God or Jesus cross your mind? When you fell in love, your beloved was on your mind 'all the time'! When you think about what Jesus wants from you, maybe he just wants to be on your mind...'*all* the time.'

Today we celebrate Veteran's Day...a day that was designated to express our gratitude to the men and women throughout the life of our country who gave themselves...all of themselves...in service in the military. All gave some...whether they enlisted or were drafted. Whether they stayed in the military as a career or left after a conflict was ended. During the time they served in the military they gave their time...and their lives. And some gave all. Many of our finest men and women were killed in conflict or died from the wounds they suffered. We pause on this day to remember them and to pay tribute to them. The time that God gave them, they gave for the welfare of all of us.

But time isn't the only thing that God has given us. It's not the only thing that God has entrusted to us and has asked us to use wisely. God has also given us talents...many talents. We function as a church in much the same way a human body functions...lots of moving parts...some seen and visible to all and some completely invisible to the naked eye. We can't do without any of these parts comfortably. If we lose one, the other parts jump in and compensate for what was lost. How are we using our talents in the body of Christ? Are we picking up the slack for some of the talents that have been lost to us? Are we thinking about new ways of doing things so that we can make maximum use of the talents we do have? Have we thought about trying new things in our church family? More likely than not, each one of us has talents that are hidden even from us. What would happen if we nurtured those talents and interests as they began to appear? One secret to knowing what your gifts are is by keeping track of where your interests lie, by what inspires you, by what you enjoy doing, by what brings you satisfaction and a sense of self-worth. Those are your talents and your gifts. They may not seem to you to be 'church' related, but you'd be surprised! Perhaps God has given us these gifts and talents because He is asking us to use *all* of them in His service.

And then there is our treasure...what the widow gave completely away. Our salaries, our retirement, our assets and even our 401k's are gifts from God. They have been entrusted to us and if we are good stewards, we are careful about how we use them. Most of us have more than we need...much more. We live in a first world country and we have first world problems. If we stop to think about what we actually need and what we simply want, we'll quickly see how many of our decisions revolve around what we want rather than what we need. Take stock of how you divide up your resources. That's always an eye-opener. Where we spend our money tells a lot about who we are and what we value. How many of you do a budget on a regular basis? That's part of being a good steward. There's the proposed budget and the actual budget. The actual budget is the one that can really open our eyes...it's when we keep track of what we actually spend money on, not what we think we're going to spend money on. Have you ever added up how much you spend on Starbucks in a month? Do you look at your entertainment budget?...and, yes, that includes Netflix and premium movie channels on cable TV. How much did you spend on vacations last year? Look at where your money goes. How much do you spend on gas and transportation? How much do you spend on clothes? Most of us have more clothes than we need. That will tell you what's important to you. If your financial giving to both church and other non-profit humanitarian organizations is pretty low on the list, you might want to contemplate that and decide for yourself what that tells you about what your priorities really are. And perhaps it will nudge you to rearrange some of your priorities...taking a little bit from over there and putting it over here.

God isn't asking for *all* of it. God is asking for the first fruits. God is asking for your best. The two great commandments tell us to love God and to love our neighbor. Our corporate worship in this space is only one of the ways that we love God. Our offerings to God of our time, our talent, and our treasure are another way of loving God and neighbor as well. How we feel about what we offer up to God is as important as what we actually offer up to God. Intentions matter to God. Our hearts matter to God. Our attitude matters to God. God celebrates the cheerful giver, not the one who gives grudgingly or guiltily.

We are dependent on God for all that we are and all that we have. And God doesn't ask for it all back. God wants from us open hearts to him and to others and he wants us to give back to him not only out of love, but from a sense of deep dependence upon him and a sense of gratitude to Him for the relationship that offers to us...and his undying love for us.

God wants to be in our hearts, in our minds, and in our actions...*all* the time!

Because we are His...*all* the time!

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.