

“What Does God Want From Us?”

Romans 12:1-8
Matthew 22:34-46
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Stewardship sermons carry such great responsibility. It is with fear and trembling that we ministers approach them, knowing how easy it is for our congregants to see what’s coming and tune us out, as we do for the PBS pledge drive. At least here you can’t get up and go fix a snack. How, we preachers think, can we get through to such a savvy audience? What technique can we use to capture their attention, to hold their interest long enough to hear our pitch?

To that end there has developed a whole genre of fundraising – I mean stewardship – sermons. Not knowing you very well yet, I have struggled which one to choose for today.

I thought about the “stewardship joke” genre. Last year around this time the Dallas Morning News devoted a whole column to them, noting that “jokes about money are popular among church members at stewardship time, ... good-naturedly [portraying] congregations as stingy [and] pastors as avaricious.” Here’s a couple: “A little girl is getting restless as the minister’s sermon drags on. Finally, she leans over to her mother. ‘Mommy,’ she whispers, ‘if we give him the money now, will he let us go?’”

Or this one: “A farmer asks his parish priest if Mass could be said for his dead dog. The priest says, ‘No, we can’t have services for an animal. But there’s a church down the street that might do it.’ ‘Thanks,’ the farmer says. ‘By the way, do you think \$50,000 is enough to donate for such a service?’ The priest replies, ‘Why didn’t you tell me the dog was Catholic?’” (Susan Hogan, www.dallasnews.com, 0918/84).

I could keep telling jokes, but for everyone’s sake I’ll move on to the second genre: the “celebrate the results” approach. In all sincerity, I think you’re entitled to hear what a difference your gifts are making – not just to make you feel good, but to celebrate what God is doing with the offerings you bring. It’s easy for me to unabashedly crow about what First Church is doing, because I am so new here, and the credit can’t go to me. Do you have any clue about how much you’re accomplishing? In less than a month, the Hurricane Katrina donations alone topped \$30,000. That’s a lot of emergency services you provided – translated into medical care and transportation, rebuilding efforts and shelter services. You should be proud. And beyond that, when I look at the ministries this church is supporting in mission – there is a whole *catalog* of efforts funded by your dollars and supported with your time: A Safe Place, and PADS, and the Haven and Hope Church in the city and the annual youth Work Trip, this year to Mississippi. And beyond that, when I see the number of lives that are touched by the day to day ministries within these walls: Pre-School children who find joyful play and godly nurture; and the Prayer shawl women who knit love into each lap-robe for the grieving and the sick; and the elders and deacons who take communion to our homebound and our Stephen Ministers who walk with our isolated or weary or heart-broken members, week after week after week; or the ministry of music, in our community concerts and worship services, through the chancel choir and the new youth band who will lead us in worship next week. I am so proud to be a part of this. Your giving matters, and I could go on and on about the impact you are having on the lives of those who come here, and the world beyond this place.

Or I could simply appeal to your kindness and compassion for my own abject neediness and fear. The truth is that many will read the results of this Stewardship drive as a measure of hope for my ministry ... or a measure of its hopelessness. Whenever a new minister comes, a measure is taken – it doesn’t bother me; it’s just the reality of life together. Not everyone, but many people wait and see whether the new pastor’s someone they think will do well: to meet their needs or serve their family, to preach a moving sermon or chart a course for the future of

our congregation. At the same time, the committees and boards of the church are stretching forward: adding ministries they hadn't gotten to during the interim, like adding our associate pastor for Family Life; or taking a bold step like buying the building next door. The expenses are great, and the opportunity is real. And the fact is that your giving can make or break my first year of ministry here. No pressure or anything

And I could stop there, I suppose, with all of the traditional stewardship seasonal appeals: to your humor ... to your generosity ... to your kindness And you might be just as happy – this would be the shortest stewardship sermon on record. But I dare not. Because the most important message still needs to be said. And it is this: in the end it doesn't matter what I want from you, and it doesn't even matter what the church wants from you. In the end the only thing that matters is what God wants from you, and from me. And if I don't have the courage to say that, then I shouldn't be here today. Let me say it again: the only thing that matters is what God wants from us. And on this, the Bible couldn't be clearer.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength,” Jesus quotes from the Torah; and “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” St. Paul translates what that means to him this way: “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice,” Paul writes to the early Christians in Rome, which Princeton's Beverly Gaventa vividly translates, “throw your bodies in the offering plate.” (Commenting at the January, 2002 meeting of the Moveable Feast study group). In other words, “God wants it all.” All of our ambition, all of our time, all of our heartache, all of our hopes. “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice,” “love the Lord your God” with everything, even your life itself. And I wonder how we are doing.

I can't help myself when I read Romans these days; my mind flashes back to a time a few summers ago when we visited Rome, and made our way to the musty corridors of the underground catacombs on the outskirts of the city. I can see it all perfectly in my mind's eye: walking slowly through the dark and musty corridors, deep beneath the peaceful fields of grass, into small rooms where, stone shelf upon shelf upon shelf, the early Christians lay their dead. We pause at one of the alcoves, its fading frescoes barely visible. These, the guide informs us, are remnants of the early Christians' shrines in memory of their friends who had been martyred. Mauled by lions for sport, or executed on the cross, these people paid with their lives for the 'crime' of refusing to worship the emperor. I find myself in holy awe, standing where my earliest brothers and sisters in Christ had secretly gathered to worship God, strengthened by the courage of their friends. It had been just decades before that Paul had written these words to the Christians – to these very people – in Rome: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength”; “present your bodies as a living sacrifice.” I am moved to see just what it cost them; and indeed, I still carry with me on my keychain, every day, this small cross from those very catacombs, a gift from an old priest, Father Roberto, who was a keeper of that sacred ground.

“Love the Lord your God”; “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice.” Two thousand years later, in the peaceful suburbs of Chicago, I stand in our gorgeous sanctuary and wonder what we really love, what we're willing to sacrifice for. Plenty, I think. Most of us love our families, and sacrifice for our kids, or an aging parent or spouse, giving up time and love and sometimes our careers for the sake of their happiness. And some of us love our work, and sacrifice for achievement or money, for better grades or a more ambitious job. And some of us love our country so much we will sacrifice our very lives, when we think that it's worth it, for freedom, or justice, or duty, or peace.

But what does it mean for us to love the Lord our God, to sacrifice everything for him? A few weeks ago I boldly proposed that love is not a feeling, but an attitude, a commitment. *Phroneon* is the Greek term for it, and it's what Paul uses when he urges us to “have the mind of

Christ” among ourselves. Love – real love – is not just affection but a decision, so that when the feelings of love fade, the concrete reality of love still stands.

If our decisions express our love, then what God wants is that our *first* decision is how we will love the Lord. And the way we love concretely are primarily with two things: with time, and with money.

Honestly, I don’t know which is more telling for me: my checkbook or my calendar, or even the incessant chattering I carry around in my head. I didn’t even notice it until I left Portland, Oregon, where I was working part-time and Annie was little, and then we moved to Clarendon Hills, where I was head-of-staff and Annie started school. Just two months into it I noticed, when I was falling asleep one night, that the running commentary in my head had shifted already from thinking about my family in my “background noise” to thinking about work all the time. It’s changed again, more recently, when I started reading Scripture again daily, and taking deliberate time for prayer. First thing in the morning, or last thing at night; it didn’t matter, as long as I made putting my life into God’s hands my first priority. And I swear to you, the running commentary in my head has changed. Not at the preclusion of everything else, but as the framework on which everything else hangs.

The same thing is true for how we spend our money. Cynthia Campbell, at a stewardship workshop some ten years ago, unabashedly confessed that it was critically important for her to write her *first* check every week, and to commit her *first* 10% every year, to the church. Yes, she really tithes, and she’s done it in good times and bad, just because it’s an act of faith to put her love for God ahead of everything else. As for me, for much of my life I’ve practiced what has come to be called a “modern tithe”: the pledge of 10% of pre-tax income divided into two: ½ goes to the church for the love of the Lord, and ½ goes to particular missions as love for the neighbor in need. Still others believe, quite radically, that “to those to whom much is given, much is expected in return,” which suggests that we should pledge on a sliding percentage scale: those who have the *least* amount of money should pledge the smallest percentage; and those who have the *most* money should pledge a much higher portion – not 10% but 15% or 20% or whatever seems appropriate beyond that. That would reverse the trend, by the way, as it currently stands: statistically, those who are poorest give the highest portion of their incomes away, and those who are the wealthiest, while giving vast amounts of money, are still giving the lowest percentage.

What matters in all of this is not the formula. What matters is that we decide – first, before anything else – we decide to love the Lord, and then figure out in concrete ways how we will express that love for him.

And this is how stewardship connects to our love for God. It’s not an ending point but a beginning point. Not that the church is a perfect institution; it’s not, which we know too well, and it’s full of fallible leaders, including all of us on staff who try our best to lead you. Our church – every church – is a human organization, and it will never be without flaw. And yet ... for better or worse, the church is the one place, the only place, that we have to deliberately come to express and share our devotion to God. And it is for that reason that our giving matters so desperately – not to the church, but to our own fragile and longing faith.

What does God want from us? God wants our love, our living sacrifice of love. Everything we do. Everything we say. Our attitudes. Our relationships. Our politics. Our money. Our investments. Our time. Everything we have, everything we care about, everything we dream of ... a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.

Now, before I close, I have to ask one final question: Why does this matter so very much to God? I’ve come to believe that it’s not for the Lord’s sake – not because the Lord is jealous, and doesn’t want to share us with anything or anybody else. It’s for *our* sake -- because the Lord knows that what we offer ourselves to – what we sacrifice for – in short, what we love – it comes

to *own* us; it owns us to our core. Politicians who sacrifice themselves to special interests become beholden to them; CEOs who offer up their integrity for their stock options become thieves. The same is true for all of us – it’s only a matter of scale. Our culture encourages us to spend our time and energy worrying about how we look and what we wear, what kind of house we live in and what car we drive, what college we get into and what degree we have behind our name. And if we choose to spend ourselves in these ways, we may become happy or we may not ... but we will surely have defined ourselves by the “offering plates” in which we have placed our lives.

The psalmist puts it eloquently:

“The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the works of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; they have eyes, but do not hear, and there is no breath in their mouths. Those who make them, and all who trust in them shall become like them” (Psalm 135:15-18).

We have a choice about how we spend ourselves ... and we will grow into the image and likeness of whatever “god” we sacrifice for ... whatever “ultimate thing” that we love.

In the Doctor of Ministry course that I began this spring, professor Sean McMillan put the issue brilliantly:

“There is a necessary relation between what communities love and what they become. The quality of one’s soul is to be intimately connected to the object of one’s devotion. ... Human beings rarely live without making a choice about what is best to love. It orders our lives; it gives coherence and meaning. We are all loving something, and something (as Tillich put it) ‘ultimately’ – but we may not be loving the right thing” (Sean McMillan, “The Genealogy of Value,” McCormick Theological Seminary, June 8, 2005).

This is the radical claim of the gospel: that God is the ultimate thing -- the only ultimate thing – worth squandering our lives on. And when we do that – when we put our love for God above and beyond anything and everything else, the rest of our priorities fall into place. Love for neighbor. Love for family. Love, even, for ourselves. Is this not the heart of Jesus’ teaching? “This is the first commandment: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. And the second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Not for God’s sake, but for ours, that we might grow more and more into our true identity, our highest calling, into the image and likeness of God that we were first made, into the image of God, who loved each one of us so much that he gave his only son for us, that we might truly live.

Today I was asked to give a stewardship sermon, and this is it: love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor as yourself. Present your bodies as a living sacrifice. Throw yourselves, your entire being, heart and soul and mind and strength, into the offering plate. For what we love is what we become. And the Lord wants us to be, of all sacred and awesome things, like him. Amen.