

## “Ham and Eggs: A Matter of Commitment”

- I. Introduction: It's A Matter of Commitment. For the past month, I have had the distinct privilege of meeting with many of you in the homes of seventeen parishioners, sharing the Eucharist together, hearing an informative and interesting presentation about Ascension – its past, present, and future -- by Bert Ackerman, and sharing a time of open discussion. I have greatly welcomed this chance to talk with you about the things on all of our minds and hearts and I look forward to many more chances to do so together as we move into our sixth week of home communions. Needless to say, during this time stewardship has been very much on my mind. So this morning I selected readings that permit me to share some of my thoughts about our commitment to stewardship.

About commitment: In December of 2000 I was ordained to the priesthood and was honored that The Rev. Ann Kimball, the Associate Dean of Berkeley Divinity School at Yale, spoke at my ordination. As part of her homily she told the following story. One bright sunny morning Chicken and Pig were out for a morning stroll. After a lengthy walk they came upon a small diner by the side of the road and out in front of the diner was a sign with big bold letters that read “HAM and EGGS – 99 cents.” Oh Boy!” said chicken, “I could go for that right now. Let's go in!” “Well,” replied Pig thoughtfully, “I don't know that I want to do that. For you it's just a contribution . . . but for me it's a total commitment!”

That evening, The Rev. Kimball gave me this meaningful charge about commitment: “Remember that your commitment to ministry as a priest, as important as it is, is only part of the total ministry of God's Church. You are surrounded this day by God's ministers. . . Without their ministry, yours will be incomplete.”

- II. You and I Are In This Ministry at Ascension Together! The strength of our shared ministry relies on how willing we are to commit our resources of time, talent, and treasure to bringing God's Kingdom on earth. Ordination is not required, although some of us become ordained. Scholarship is also not required, although learning greatly supports our ministries. But our willingness to make a personal commitment of our resources to Christ is most definitely a bottom line pre-requisite. I would define this commitment as being willing to say “yes” when Christ calls us to take some kind of action. Right now, I propose that Christ is calling us at Ascension to increase our level of stewardship. I believe that we are literally surrounded by the evidence of God's abundant blessing and that we are being invited to offer up a generous and sacrificial response.

III. Generosity. It is often powerful to see how God challenges us to go more deeply in our faith through showing us the generosity of the poor and others with limited resources. As I prepared this sermon, such an experience came to mind. It occurred when I was a taxi driver in Chicago. My mother was a widow, and my father's life insurance had used up to send me and my sister to college. My mother and sister had decided to travel from the East Coast to Chicago in order to spend Christmas with me. At that time, I was a poor, and I mean very poor, graduate student. My mother was a widow who was living on a small fixed income. We had decided to pool our resources to make this trip possible, and I was driving a taxicab mostly on the near north side of Chicago to earn some money toward the trip. The area in which I drove had many wealthy business people, especially during the day, and I would sometimes drive them back and forth to the Northwestern train station. I noticed something striking about many of these businessmen – and they were always almost all men. They were very precise about the tips they gave me. Rarely did they give more me than 10% even if that meant they'd keep part of the change I gave them.

One day I responded to a radio dispatch to go to a relatively poor area back away from Lake Michigan. A very modestly dressed elderly man came out of a house, carrying his little dog. He was taking his dog to the vet. When we got to the vet he gave me a tip that was larger than the whole cab fare. I told him that that was too much, but he insisted that I keep it. I remember sitting there feeling very grateful and thinking about how freely that man had shared what he had with me. He didn't know why I was driving that cab or about our Christmas needs. His generosity came very naturally. He gave freely and with an open heart to a young guy driving a cab. All these years later I remember exactly what he and his dog looked like and I am grateful still for his generosity.

IV. I tell this story about generosity to illustrate a core element of Christian stewardship: The importance of giving joyfully and freely. In his commentary on Luke, Bible scholar William Barclay wrote that there are two things that determine the value of any gift. First, there is the spirit of freedom and joy in which it is given. Secondly, the value of any gift is determined in part by the sacrifice behind the gift. The only real gift, Barclay says, is the inevitable outflow of the loving heart, that which is given because the giver cannot help but give it. Barclay wants us to understand why Jesus used the example of the very poor widow. She gave the smallest of all coins called the lepta. The name of the coin meant "the thin one." Jesus used this example to teach his followers about giving freely with open hearts. In her willingness to give so much of what she had, such a large proportion of her meager resources, this woman became an example of profound faithfulness. Jesus constantly used the poor and the powerless to challenge the wealthy and self-sufficient to change. Today we, as did Jesus' disciples, find the contrast of the widow's gift all the more striking

because we sometimes tend to discount the value of small gifts. In contrast Jesus was emphasizing that God sees and knows our hearts when we give; God recognizes that the amount of freedom and joy we have in giving reflects our love and appreciation for Him. Our giving is a reflection of our relationship with God.

III. **Sacrificial Giving.** Now I'd like to tell you a second story about giving. As you may remember, I went on a mission trip to the Dominican Republic. A group from St. Thaddeus Episcopal Church traveled there to assist with vacation Bible School at an Episcopal camp for children from a nearby barrio. The missionaries who had invited us to assist with their work there took us into this barrio, up and down the winding dirt roads filled with make-shift houses, chickens running freely, and children, many, many children. We approached a small house with dirt floors and the woman and her 7-year-old daughter who lived there came running out to meet us. The week before this little girl had attended our Vacation Bible School. Her one treasure from that week was a simple crayon color drawing of a Bible story that she had brought home. She took the drawing down from the wall of her home and gave it to one of the women on our team. We could see that nothing else hung on the walls in this house. My friend's reaction was to try not to accept this gift, but little girl refused to take the picture back. Instead she just came up to my friend and hugged her. As Barclay and others emphasize, the sacrificial nature of a gift very much helps to determine its value. Similarly, in our Old Testament lesson, the prophet Elijah was told by God to go to the home of the widow of Zarephath and ask for food. As he approached the widow's home, she was gathering wood to build a fire on which to cook the last meal for herself and her son. In spite of being near starvation, she prepared Elijah a meal -- clearly another example of sacrificial giving. By sharing her food, the widow and her son might well have starved more quickly. Due to her generosity, the widow's jar of meal and jug of oil did not go empty until the famine was over.

IV. **Conclusion:** The value of our gifts to God can be measured not only by their amounts, but also by how fully we give with open hearts and how much of a sacrifice we are willing to make. What I hope we will remember is that, every bit of our time, our talent, and our treasure starts out as a gift to us. At the 8:00 service offertory the priest at Ascension says: "All things come from thee, Oh Lord," and the people respond "And of thine own have we given thee." You see, when we really comprehend how much God has blessed us -- each one of us -- our desire to respond to those blessings then becomes very powerful.

My brothers and sisters, our God teaches us to give of our treasures and, if we are open, prepares our hearts to do so. But the actual choices are left to us. As we make our choices I ask each of us to remember one of the central paradoxical truths of our faith, something that I have been sharing in our home communions -- the more we

hang onto what we have and who we are, the more we will lose ourselves. The more we give of ourselves and our possessions, in faith and in love, the more fully blessed we will become.

We are reporting to you on a regular basis the number of pledges we receive this fall. We are emphasizing the number of pledges, rather than the amount of money pledged, because the gift of each member of our community counts. I close by repeating the final part of The Reverend Ann Kimball's charge to me. It is as true on October 21, 2007 as it was on December 11, 2000. "Remember that your commitment to ministry as a priest, as important as it is, is only part of the total ministry of God's Church. You are surrounded this day by God's ministers. . . Without their ministry, yours will be incomplete." We need one another! We are all in this together at The Church of the Ascension. *Amen.*