

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost ~ Proper 20, Year A
September 21, 2008
John Robertson, Stewardship Committee, Co-chair

“Stewardship And Mission & Ministry”

When Father Howard told me he thought that I should deliver a sermon as co-chair of the stewardship pledge campaign team for 2009, you should have seen my face. If you could have seen my electrocardiogram you would have noticed a couple of skipped heartbeats. I told him I thought it was a bad idea. The pulpit is best left to professionals not amateurs like me. Well, he persisted and I told him that I didn't have anything to say but I would think about it. I prayed about it and God gave me something to say.

In the gospel reading today, Jesus says, heaven is like a landowner who went out to solicit laborers for his vineyard. God seeks out laborers for his work in the world. The landowner rewarded the laborers at the end of their work day. God too will reward those of us who labor for Him at the end of our days here on earth. The landowner did not reward the laborers according to whether they came early in the day or late in the day.

That is strange to our worldly way of thinking, but the standards in heaven are utterly different than those on earth. However, there is another way of thinking about this. In my will, upon my death, I don't reward my children based on the amount of hours they devoted to me. I will reward them equally because I love them all. They are all my children. Similarly, all of us who accept the call from God to work in his vineyards here on earth are His children. He loves us all and He will reward us all generously.

The something that God told me to share with you is the story of my spiritual journey from the perspective of financial stewardship. There are numerous ways that we can look at our spiritual journeys. For me, my financial stewardship journey has been integral and most important to my transformation as a Christian. For me, giving of my time and talent have been much easier than giving my money.

Whenever anyone talks about financial stewardship in this setting it is easy to sound arrogant and prideful. I hope not to come across in this way.

Short of being prideful, I am proud of my relationship with God just as I am proud of my relationship with Dana, my wife, who is co-chair of the 2009 Stewardship Pledge Campaign Team. I am proud of my relationship with my parents, my children, and my friends and I am especially proud of my relationship with you, my Ascension family.

In these relationships, am I always the generous, loving, Christ-like person I want to be? No, I am a work in progress.

First, some background information about me.

As a child, my family and I rarely went to church. My mother introduced me to the ideas of Christianity as a young child and through various influences and opportunities, especially summer vacation bible schools, I had my first conversion experience when I was 12. I was baptized. Also, at age 12, God gave me my vocation to be a physician. God and I enjoyed a friendly, but not close relationship throughout most of my childhood and my teenage life.

Then I went to college. The first semester of my freshman year I took a philosophy course along with my premed science courses. I fell in love with exploring the big questions of life. Who am I? What is knowledge? What is the world? Then I found out that a greater percentage of philosophy majors got into medical schools than any other major. As a philosophy major, I learned logic and rational reasoning. I slowly became an agnostic and then an atheist. During this period, my father told me half-jokingly that if a person at some point in their life does not become an atheist, he is a fool, but if he does not return to God, he is a damned fool.

My returning happened at age 36. God used my oldest son Steven, then about 12 years of age, to lead me back. That was pretty sneaky. Like any good atheist father, I had raised my children to be good atheists. None of that magical thinking stuff for us. But God was still there working His magic. One day, Steven made a disparaging remark about someone because of their faith. It was then that I realized that Steven really had no clue to the central importance of faith to many people's identity. Since he had never experienced religious faith and had been taught by me that the whole idea of God was just a magical wishful thinking, there was no way that he could understand its importance to the vast majority of people and to be respectful of it. I worried how Steven was going to make it in this world without the ability to respect people's faith because he couldn't even comprehend faith.

There were other factors at work in me as well, but the bottom line is that we began looking for a church in order to get a religious education for our children. We came to Ascension largely because of the youth program.

Before I forget it, I have got to digress and tell you one short story about our efforts to decide upon the church that we would attend. After one visit to a well-respected, non-Episcopal church just down the street, on the way home in the car I asked Steven what he thought about his Sunday school class. He grinned slyly and said "Well, I learned one thing today. You and Mommy are going to hell."

Before I came to Ascension, my level of giving was minimal. I was more interested in my own needs than those of others.

When I first came to Ascension, I started regularly giving when the offering plate was passed whenever I attended church. Now, I was just beginning to pray, study, worship, and serve. I chose how much to put into the offering plate based on the entertainment value of the services. To me, at the time, it seemed only fair. I figured it like this: the comparable cost for say tickets to a movie for a family of 5 would be about \$30, so \$30 seemed a fair amount to pay for services rendered whenever I attended. I had no idea the actual cost is more than \$60 per person more than \$300 for a family of five. Apparently, worshipping God at Ascension is more on par with a Broadway show than a local theater movie.

Pledging was a totally foreign concept for me. At this stage, I could not understand why anyone, but a religious fanatic, would pledge.

And you know, I was proud of that \$30 donation. I felt good about it. I felt generous. I was paying what I thought was a fair amount. And you know what? God was proud of me too. Yes he was. He knew that I was taking my first steps along this spiritual path. Like a parent who is so pleased with their child's first attempts to crawl, so was God with me. I was being transformed by the process of my spiritual journey.

Every person's journey is different. I am certainly not suggesting that my financial stewardship journey is or should be the same for you.

The next major step for me was after I began to have a sense of belonging to Ascension. I attended the inquirers class. I was confirmed. My children were baptized. I attended Alpha, a wonderful Anglican spiritual renewal experience. Alpha, by the way, exorcised me of the last remnants of my atheistic beliefs. In fact, Ed Lester was my small group co-facilitator. Thanks, Ed. Boy, did I give Ed a hard time.

So, now I am a member of Ascension and members should be responsible for their share of operational expenses of the church. So, if the budget is a million dollars and there are 300 pledging households then I should do my fair share by contributing \$3,333.33 per year, equivalent to a tithe on an annual household income after taxes of about \$50,000. When I first calculated this number, I thought "Wow! That is a lot of money! I don't know if I can afford that." But God had blessed me with a generous income and members should pay their dues, right? It was only fair and God wanted me to do my part.

The tax write-off took the sting out of it a little bit and I felt good. Now, I was truly a member in good-standing at Ascension. One of the requirements to be a member in good-standing is to regularly give financially to the support of the church.

I was proud of my pledge. It was more than I had ever given before and you know what? God was proud of me also. He knew that I was allowing myself to be transformed into a more generous and joyful giver. Again, like a parent watching their child take it's first steps, I was beginning to walk. No longer crawling, I was walking.

The next step for me was in some ways the hardest. The dreaded tithe step. Yes, through my adult educational classes, I learned that everything we receive is from God and everything belongs to God and we are suppose to give of our first fruits the best fruits to God. This is important for us, not God. It is important for us to prevent the corrupting influences of selfishness and greed that turn us away from God. Christianity's minimal giving standard is the tithe. Justification for tithing is biblical, both old and new testament. In scripture, Jesus himself makes it clear that tithing is expected.

Well, I resisted tithing as long as I could. I researched it. I argued it. The Pharisee in me tried to find loopholes. Finally, I decided to work toward the goal of tithing by increasing my percentage of giving each year. We changed our lifestyle. We ultimately sold our home and downsized.

Remember when you were a child and you got a new pair of tennis shoes. You put them on and you took off running and you felt like you could go so super fast. It felt so exhilarating and so good. That is the way I felt. I was proud of my tithing and God was proud of me, too, just like a parent watching their child run for the first time.

I chose to have a separate checking account for God. At the first of every month, I put 10% of my previous month's income into God's checking account, and then I wrote a check to Ascension, saving a portion to be given later whenever and to whomever God directed me. This quickly became God's and my fun money. One of our more generous parishioners, David Reath, recently told me after I had thanked him for donating \$65 to purchase a chair for Grace Point , "What good is having money if you can't enjoy giving it away?" Wow! What a statement! The joy of giving and I was now experiencing it.

What is my next stage? Well, I suspect it has something to do with stretching myself even more. I will have to get out of my comfort zone again. God does not let us rest for long. He loves us too much to let us grow fat and lazy at whatever stage of development we are in. I guess I will learn to skip or ultimately learn to dance with God. Part of me looks forward to doing that, but I don't look forward to the transformational challenges I will have to face to get there. My stewardship spiritual journey has been hard and painful at times. At difficult financial times in my life, it would have been much easier to not keep my tithing commitment. However, God always lead me to take the leap of faith and go ahead and give 10%.

The stages of my financial stewardship have been amazingly transformational and exhilarating. There is something about being on this spiritual journey with God, about learning to give, about learning to be generous, becoming a joyful giver that is wonderful. Instead of becoming poorer financially, I have become wealthier. But the major rewards are not financial, although, I expect you will be blessed with those also. The major reward is the personal transformation that occurs as we journey with God. God knows that sometimes I would rather crawl than walk, or walk than run. I am certainly not ready to dance.

God is still working with me on my spiritual journey and I know He is working with you on your spiritual journey also. The Holy Spirit lifts us up helping to transform us. We are all on this Christian spiritual journey together.

Our relationship with God is what is important. A healthy relationship takes a lot of work and commitment. We at Ascension are committed to God. We love God. We are a generous people.

We have been undergoing a wonderful renewal and transformation since Father Howard came to shepherd us. He has stated that we at Ascension are experiencing a special Kairos time. The Holy Spirit is working among us.

Last year, in the stewardship campaign, we climbed the mountain. This year we are ready to soar with the Holy Spirit, the wind beneath our wings.

Let me introduce to you Mission and Ministry, or M&M as we like to call them. {Retrieve caged doves.} These 2 doves symbolize the Holy Spirit's work among us here at Ascension, especially in the stewardship pledge campaign for 2009. M&M will be with us weekly during the pledge campaign until the stewardship pig roast in November when we will celebrate the work of the Holy Spirit among us, especially in helping us on our journey with God, learning to become more generous and joyful givers. During this celebration we will release the doves to soar over Ascension and East Tennessee. Actually we will substitute two professional stunt doves specially trained to return to their owner. We wouldn't want anything to happen to M&M.

Why M&M, Mission and Ministry?

Mission because the vestry of Ascension has responded to God's call by making the commitment, beginning 2009, to devote 10% of every dollar we receive to outreach or mission, a congregational tithe. We anticipate for 2009 that more than 30,000 additional dollars will be devoted to opportunities that God is offering us to carry out the Great Commission and to minister to the needs of those outside the walls of Ascension. This commitment is a great leap of faith by the vestry, clergy, and other Ascension church leaders; faith that the Holy Spirit will continue to help us increase our generosity; and faith in us that we will respond to the work of the Holy Spirit by increasing our giving. If we do

not respond by increasing both the number of pledges and the average pledge amount for 2009, then a significant amount will have to be cut from our current programs and staff to fund this congregational tithe.

This dove is named Ministry because God is presenting us with additional wonderful ministry opportunities within Ascension. For 2009, monies pledged beyond those needed to continue current Ascension ministries will be devoted toward these opportunities. We hope to have enough money to do them all. In the event, we must choose some to do now and some later. The vestry will be asking for your input to prioritize these additional wonderful ministries.

God is so generous. Jesus has taught us so much about God's generosity. This is a time of Kairos at Ascension. The Holy Spirit is among us working to transform us. We are each one invited to enter further into a deeper relationship with God, to walk with Him on our individual journeys, and on our larger collective Ascension journey, and to grow, prosper, and become more joyful, generous, and loving.

Thank you Ascension for all you have done for this former atheist. You have done more than you will ever know to help me along my spiritual journey and continuing transformation. You are my family. I love you. *Amen.*