

“Here We Are Lord”

Prayer:

Here we are, Lord, you and me and all of us together; here to worship you on this All Saints Sunday. We come to you in need of your guidance and your blessing. As you know today is Stewardship Sunday and it is hard to give fully to your work when we feel uncertain about our own futures. It is hard to be generous with our resources when some of us are in fearful places. And it is hard to listen to the words of your Spirit when there are many chattering words in our own minds and many discordant words in the world around us. But here we are, anyway, Lord. Speak to us; help us to open our hearts, our minds, and our hands to be grateful and generous. Thank you for loving us, for being patient with us, and for giving us opportunity after opportunity to love you back. In the name of your son, Jesus Christ our Lord, we pray. Amen.

- I. Here I Am Lord: Over and over again in my spiritual life God has communicated with me through music—such as the Song “On Eagles’ Wings” which I first heard at my sister’s funeral; “The Church’s One Foundation,” that formed a gateway into the Episcopal Church when after a long and arduous search I finally found a spiritual home; and the song “Here I am Lord,” which through no action on my own part was one of the hymns at my ordination to the diaconate at Newark Cathedral. I have since requested that it be sung at important junctures in my spiritual journey.

I’d like to focus on the occasion when I first encountered the song “Here I Am, Lord.” In that experience it felt less like my prayer to God, but rather God’s assurance to me of God’s presence. The first day of orientation at Yale-Berkeley Divinity School, the students and their families and the faculty had a worship service in Yale’s historic Divinity School Chapel. The opening hymn was “Here I Am, Lord.” The singing of that hymn was very powerful for me and brought tears to my eyes. I was feeling frightened that day. I’d been out of school for many years. Although I’d been successful in another career, I was afraid I would not succeed in this new endeavor. My fearfulness was probably intensified by how public this step to begin seminary was – all my colleagues, family, and friends knew what I was doing. The majority of them did not

have the foggiest notion why I was going to seminary. They genuinely wished me well, but some thought I was a bit balmy. My fears at that time however, were not whether God had called me to become an ordained priest. Instead, again my fears were that I wouldn't be able to succeed. And as many of you know, fear is often not based on reality, it just is. When I began to sing that song I felt that God was saying, "I have called you; I honor your response to me; I will support you in this; all is well." There and then, in the midst of taking a step of faith, God spoke to me.

- II. Now I believe God is speaking to us here at Ascension about our faithfulness as a community of believers. We have heard stewardship sermons for four weeks. (Oh my, how patient you have been.) You heard The Reverend Corky Carlisle talk to us head-on about how much God has given us and how God calls us to sacrificial giving. You have also heard from our Vestry members who have been willing to take a stand with the congregation on stewardship; their thoughtful statement is included in today's bulletin and also displayed in the narthex. You've heard me talk about God's generosity, and Fr. Rob talk about his life-long learning about tithing and his encouragement for us as a parish to give in proportion to our wealth. You've heard Fr. Brett share his story of being new to tithing and how he has come to understand that tithing requires us to set aside God's portion first as we decide how to spend our money. And you've heard Leslie Beale courageously tell her and Leo's story about continuing to tithe in the face of tough times and encouraging all of us to do the same.

Today, reflecting our deep belief in the revelation of Scripture, we give the final word to Christ. In the Matthean Beatitudes Jesus told the crowd gathered around him, and tells us here this morning, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." What did Jesus mean by "the poor in spirit"? There is consensus that he meant those who have been willing to follow him by embracing the virtue of humility and detaching themselves from the importance of their wealth. And moving down to the sixth Beatitude, Christ said, "Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God." It is understood that in Matthew these words refer to those who strive to keep a holy covenant with God, following God's commands and participating in sincere worship. Each invitation to holy living is coupled with a promise by Christ. The poor in spirit will be a part of the Kingdom of Heaven, and the pure in heart will see God. I have no question but that our willingness to give sacrificially of our material wealth as well as of our time and of our talents is at the heart of what Christ is asking us to do. It comes back to the same bottom line, doesn't it? It's not about Ascension really; it's

about our personal relationships with God and our willingness to step out in faith despite the risks involved.

IV. Conclusion. The time for talking is over. The time for decision-making and action has come. I close by sharing the most powerful story about stewardship I have ever heard. Ironically, it is a story that I heard The Reverend Corky Carlisle tell when I first met him in South Carolina. Just a few weeks ago, Corky told me that he had first told this story here at the Church of the Ascension several years ago. Corky ministered in Kenya, going there for multiple mission trips. On one occasion it was Stewardship Sunday at the Anglican Cathedral in Nairobi. It is the practice of many African churches for the people to bring their pledges and their offerings to the altar and place them there themselves. They do not rely upon their priests or ushers to do this for them. This is what the congregation was doing in Nairobi on Stewardship Sunday. The people brought their pledges up and it appeared that everyone who was going to do so, had come to the altar. The priest asked whether anyone else wanted to participate and was about to continue with the service. Then they heard a noise – the sound of a metal cup hitting the concrete floor. It came from the back of the Cathedral. Everyone turned around and saw that a woman who suffered from long-term leprosy was beginning to make her way to the front. Her hands and feet had been so affected by the disease that she could only move by having cups on her limbs to protect them. The congregation sat in stunned silence as the woman made her way up to the altar and placed herself in a collection plate. She had nothing else to give but herself. Her gift of herself is what Corky wanted us to see when, in his sermon several weeks ago, he asked Trey, Pat and John Barrow's grandson, to put himself in the collection plate. My prayer for all of us in this community of believers is that we can be similarly open to the movement of God's spirit and generous in our giving of ourselves.

Let us pray. Here we are Lord, you and me and all of us who have come to worship you this morning. Forgive us, but at times we are insecure and afraid about our future. But we love you and are willing to step forward in faith. Help us to take the risks that each of us needs to take to in order to experience more fully the presence of your life-giving power. *Amen.*