

The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost - Year B
October 25, 2009
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“Give God A Chance”

I love rules. Just the idea of a world, a home, a life that runs in an orderly, predictable routine makes me smile. My loves of rules, the way they work, their purpose, led me to become a lawyer. And, I hope that it helps to make me good at what I do.

I am a little ashamed to admit, though, that it was my love of rules, rather than a desire to model my life after Jesus’ teachings, that has fuelled my giving to the Church – at least until recently. Some of you may recall that last year during a stewardship minute, Leo talked about my unusually strong penchant for a household budget and my belief in disciplined giving. As a follow up, I would love to be able to stand here this morning and tell you a deeply moving and inspiring story about my long and devoted stewardship journey. But, the truth, as is usually the case, is not quite so simple.

The truth is that for most of my adult life, I have written a check every Sunday morning because it’s what I saw my mother do every week growing up. I would sit beside her and admire her perfect cursive (*which I have never managed to master, by the way*) on our family’s check to the church. Regardless of what else was going on, I could always count on this routine. And so I knew, without her ever saying so, that “that was what you did.” And, loving rules the way I do, I took this lesson to heart.

For most of my life, I have given a set amount of money to the church I attend. I believe in being fairly disciplined about that. And, I have been very fortunate to have never had to make a hard choice about my giving. At least I thought I was fortunate. But, maybe because my giving has always come easy, there has never been anything especially transformative, or even spiritual, about it. Until recently.

For several reasons, which some of you know about but I won’t go into now, Leo and I have faced a series of what have been, at least for me, very frightening financial circumstances this year. Our situation came unexpectedly, but quickly. The numbers were big. And before we knew it, things were not good. These are challenges that many people live their entire lives struggling with, and I feel just a little bit guilty even admitting that I have not done a better job of recognizing that. Our problems are not special or unique or new, except that this time they are ours. And for me, that has made them nothing short of terrifying.

So, when I met with Fr. Howard a few weeks ago to prepare for this message, I was very nervous to say the least. But, I felt much better once I read the gospel passage for today. This is something I can relate to, something I can talk about. Like the blind man, I too have recently cried out for God's mercy. I have whined, I have pleaded, I have bargained, and I have claimed I could not take any more. And God's response to me has echoed the words to the blind beggar in Mark – "Take heart, get up, he is calling you."

Like the beggar, I have been tempted to sit on the roadside waiting for someone to come and rescue me. As my mother would say, I have been "wallowing around" hoping somehow things will get better. To be sure, I've been very willing to call out – I just don't want to have to do much more than that. But, much like Jesus did not run to rescue the blind man, God's response has been to simply call me from the ditch.

"Take heart."

As is his way, God knows that we cannot respond to a challenge unless we are comforted first. Over the past months, when I have stopped worrying, stopped planning, stopped doubting long enough to hear him, God has offered me a steady stream of encouragement. I can tell you that facing financial upheaval is a daunting task. It triggers fears and anxieties that are often unnamed and almost never spoken of. It challenges your values – shines a light on areas you'd rather not have anyone see. But, I've come to realize that in the end we never were fooling God anyway. He knows we are the beggar and he sees us on the side of the road. He knows how much we spend on going out to eat and that we spent more on one pair of shoes this month than we put in the plate. But, our fears, our shame, our guilt paralyze us – and trap us in the ditch just like the beggar's blindness trapped him. And yet God's response, his first message to us, is simple – "Take heart."

But those comforting words are not the end – the solution to our problems. The beggar in Mark wasn't told to take heart simply so he could stay on the roadside blind. No – the comfort is preparation, it's fuel for the journey. Because, like the beggar, we are all called by God to take action. Now, action is something I am generally very comfortable with. Those who know me best know I am rarely without a plan, without a "to do" list. But, our recent situation has shaken my ability to take action. I have stared at budgets trying to find a plan, a solution. I have crunched numbers over and over again. And, more often than I'd like to admit, rather than making the really hard decisions, my eye has been drawn to the line devoted to our monthly tithe. Not infrequently, I have thought how much easier it would be if we had that money for other things.

Again, I would like to tell you that my abiding faith, my devotion kept me from raiding these funds. But, at least in the beginning, it was really nothing so inspiring at all. Honestly, it was fear. It's not that I didn't have faith. I did. But, at a time when I felt like everything was up in the air, I turned to what I knew because I was afraid of the consequences of not writing that check. As I read today's story from Mark, I imagined that like me, the beggar, while he had faith, got up as much out of fear as anything else. I mean, it was Jesus – God's Son in the flesh and blood – calling. How could he really have said no?

But God did a strange thing with that fearful first move, and he has done a strange, wonderful thing with mine as well. Did you notice that when the beggar got to Jesus, he wasn't asked about his motives—he wasn't asked why he came – he was simply healed because of his faith. As I have opened my hands, admittedly out of fear and obligation as much as anything else, God has made me well. Just as Jesus took the blindness from the beggar, God has calmed my worries, eased my fears, and provided for me in ways that I could not imagine. For the first time, giving has been a real sacrifice for me. And for the first time, it has opened my eyes to God's provision. Because, you see, even during these challenges, there has always been enough. More than enough really. There were weeks when writing our check to the church felt like stepping off a cliff and not knowing where we would land. There were days when the numbers didn't make sense. But God has found a way to work things out. And I have found the sense of abiding peace that I really never had before. I know in ways I'm not sure I appreciated before that I matter to God, that he is watching what happens to me and caring for me. And, I know that he is watching those around me as well. And, I am comforted to know that, in the same way he has provided for me, God is using my tithe back to him to provide for others.

It has become clichéd to say that we find ourselves in hard times. To be sure, we are facing financial problems that have not been seen in decades. It is unsettling, it is frustrating, it is downright scary. But, I think that perhaps our hard times started before we all realized. I find myself wondering whether our constant uneasiness about money, our insecurity, our materialism are because we have as a society lost the notion and the tradition of sacrificial giving. Maybe we are so nervous, maybe we chase the dollar so hard, because we have never really given God the chance to show us how he can provide. I know I never did.

But, Jesus' words to the beggar are true— Your faith will make you well.

As we have continued to give -sometimes out of fear, sometimes out of hope - God has gently and smoothly reordered our lives. Things we once thought we could not live without are barely missed. Numbers that should not add up do. I still worry about what will

happen, but it does not consume my life. I feel well –better, in fact, than I actually wanted to be.

Throughout this stewardship campaign, various people have talked to Leo and me about their giving. We know that many of you, like us, find yourselves in new and challenging circumstances. We have heard from those who don't feel they are in the position to tithe. We have heard from those who don't know what the next month will bring. We know many of you are frightened and uneasy.

My message this morning is simple – Give God a chance. Try true sacrificial giving – giving that makes you feel a little like you are jumping off a cliff. Don't do it because we need to pay the light bill here at Ascension, or because it's what you are supposed to do, or even because you think God will use your money to work wonders in his Kingdom. Because at the end of the day, it really isn't about the giving at all. It's about the sacrifice. It's about giving up enough to give God some room to work in your life. And if you do, I believe that God will make you well in areas where you might not have even known you were hurting.

Amen.