

GOD THE GIVER

Stewardship Narrative Series presented by TENS

*Proper 27
Mark 12:38-44*

Stewardship was not a word that I grew up with, but globalization is making it a more popular word. I came into the Episcopal Church through the Haitian community, and in my community we used the phrase “obligation missionary” (missionary obligation), not stewardship, to talk about our support of the Church. My perspective on the story is a little different from many sermons that I have heard.

Step back from reading this passage from a dominant point of view where the Pharisees, scribes, and persons with economic status hold all the power. From the widow’s perspective, we see the simplicity of the act. She put in her coins because it was part of her ritual, the way she relates to her God. She fulfilled her obligation but not to have a relationship with God or to fulfill the law as the Pharisees might do. In the early Church, in the new covenant under Christ, we are called to share of what we have for the betterment of the community

and to grow the church of Jesus Christ. Under the new covenant we share what we have in order to have a relationship with the entire community.

The widow did not give of her surplus. She did not give for tax credit or recognition. The widow shared what she had. Our “obligation missionary” is about sharing, whether it is two pennies or several billions. By sharing we stay engaged with each other and our community. As members of the Christian community it is our “missionary obligation” to share, not give. God did not give to a small group the fruits of creation for us to amass and distribute. God gave all of creation to all of us as stewards.

God shared with us His being. We are created in the image of God. God shared His Son Jesus with us. God remains engaged in our lives. Do not *give* but *share* with pride whatever you have. That is the power of the widow.



The widow was proud of her two pennies, and her commitment and engagement with her entire community. Maybe this is the self-giving act that Jesus wanted his disciples to see.

Reflection Questions:

How do you understand your “obligation missionary”?

Do you think of your offering of financial support as “giving” or “sharing”? What is the difference?

Does sharing your financial gifts strengthen your commitment to the community?



The Rev. Judith Alexis most recently served L'Eglise de l'Epiphanie in Stamford, the Haitian Ministry of the Diocese of Connecticut, and as the Haitian missionary for the diocese until 2014. Currently, she enjoys her new ministry as a court interpreter for the judicial system and a supply priest for congregation in her area.



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Proper 22
Mark 10:2-16

Twenty years ago, when I was a high school freshman, one of America's most prominent preachers led a conference in my tiny hometown. The first night, I ran up to the evangelist, eagerly thrust out my hand, and said, "My name is Levi Harris, and I'm so excited to hear you speak!" Without looking up, the preacher nodded, muttered "uh-huh," and walked away to speak with local religious grandees about his fee. My town and I were beneath him, levying unwelcome taxes on his time and stature. He couldn't wait to get back to people and places that mattered.

His actions stand in stark contrast to Jesus' actions in today's Gospel. Jesus is a busy man too, on the road to Jerusalem and the Cross. He doesn't have much time.

But over the disciples' objections, Jesus takes a break from teaching, sits down, and focuses on being present with this band of little strangers. Where the disciples see a bunch of noisy, dirty, goofy kids making demands on Jesus' dwindling time and energy, Jesus sees an opportunity to give.

Time may be the most extravagant gift of all. We can always earn more money and buy more things, but we can't make more time. Time is a fixed commodity; once it is spent, it's gone forever. Even life itself is just a brief parenthetical carved tenuously out of the eons of eternity. That's why we shouldn't spend time on meaningless trifles: We don't have time to waste.

However, Jesus shows us that sharing time with others isn't wasteful. Stranger and friend, young and old, whole and infirm, rich and poor: people are worth our time. They're worth the effort it takes to make memories with them; to touch, serve, and bless them.

In fact, though science and experience teach us we can't stop time, sharing our time can bring us very, very close. Playing with children, say, or Christmas caroling at nursing homes, or serving food to the grateful hungry, or laughing with old friends, we may find ourselves transported again and again, suddenly, sublimely, to those "thin places" in which time stands still and, for fleeting moments, we're able to glimpse



eternity. And I promise you that every loving, grateful act is timeless, and every wave it casts will keep on rippling, across forever, to the very end of the universe.

Two decades later, I still remember the preacher who thought I wasn't worth his time. Meanwhile, I suspect the little children Jesus took up in his arms that day were still telling the tale of his selfless generosity for the rest of their lives.

Miserly or magnanimous: What will they say about us?

Reflection Questions:

What activities occupy most of your time? Are the activities tiring or life-giving?

How do you feel when someone important to you devotes time to you?

What does Jesus teach us about how we use our time?



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Proper 23
Mark 10:17-31

By worldly standards I'm rich; I have food, more than one pair of shoes, clothes for every season, good health care, reliable transportation, a comfortable place to sleep, and I owe no one. Yet, by U.S. standards I'm not at all rich. Years ago, while on the road to financial wealth, I listened to the wrong advice and was beaten to a financial pulp and landed in a ditch. While in the ditch I had a lucky break; I was on my church's stewardship committee (because I didn't mind making phone calls) and they sent me to a local stewardship conference where I heard Bishops Ted Jones and Cate Waynick describe their journeys to tithing and the joy and richness of life that journey brought them. I committed to tithe ... right then. On the way home from that conference in my \$70 car I figured out how I could do it. Just keep a log of every little bit I earned and on Sunday 10% of the week's earnings would go to church. I did it ... tithed to the penny every little bit of income for a year. What happened? My checkbook recovered, and I'm still giving with the tithe as the minimum.

What am I discovering on my journey of giving? When I started sharing what I had, worrying about the lack of money stopped. That's when my pocketbook began to heal. Most remarkable, though, has been the healing of my soul, the freedom reaped from the peace of mind gained from being a go-giver rather than a go-getter.

Have I sold everything? No. To sell all I own and follow Jesus is more than I can do! My failure at selling all I own is buffered a bit by recalling: "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

Here's what this mortal soul has done though: I've given it all away through the miracle of Planned Giving.

What did the rich man do after the suggestion to go sell what he owned? We don't know. One thing I do know for certain: I love me and my fellow man more after coming to grips with giving away what I have been given.



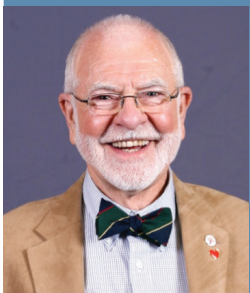
The road is wide enough for you to join me on my journey. Should you stay on the tithing road for a year, as I did, you may wish to continue. You'll never know 'til you try! Of this I'm certain: You'll not regret the journey.

Reflection Questions:

Do you consider yourself rich?

Make a list of all the ways that you are rich.

What events or memories mark your journey of giving?



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Proper 24
Mark 10:35-45

Abraham cast Hagar and her baby into the desert with nothing but some bread and water. When those ran out, Hagar left Ishmael alone because she could not bear to watch him die. When baby Ishmael lost everything—parents, sustenance, shelter—he had nothing—but the God that saved him.

Ishmael's polar opposite is Willy Loman in "The Death Of A Salesman." Thomas Dumm describes Willy as lonely, alienated, and trapped in the struggle to succeed by having. But the life of having is empty. "Getting and spending we lay waste our powers. Little we see in nature that is ours." (Wordsworth)

Psychoanalyst Eric Fromm said that Western culture had promised us happiness through possessions, but that a life of getting, spending, and clutching had failed to deliver. It cuts us off from ourselves and reduces us to jumping through economic hoops. But we can live happily through participation in the dance of humanity. Fromm calls that "being." We develop the capacity for being through letting go of possessions and connecting with each other.

Gabriel Marcel says the problem is treating the world as something we can watch, dominate, possess, manipulate. He calls that "having." We can "have" our families as much as our homes. We stand one step removed from everything; using instead of celebrating.

Real life happens when we give ourselves away. It's as vulnerable as baby Ishmael because it is engaged with others, participating rather than controlling. It's surfing.

Jesus' disciples left everything to follow him. Eventually, they asked, "Now what will we get in return?" Jesus said, "Whoever finds his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it." The word translated as "life" is *psyche*. It means our core identity.

Communion is about plunging into a spontaneous flowing state of appreciation and gratitude. We place our gifts on God's altar to represent all we have and all we are. Our gifts are blessed, broken, and shared with one another. It is the exchange of



having for being. We give ourselves to God and open our hearts to life.

Meister Eckhart said, "The person who is full of things is empty of God; but the person who is empty of things is full of God." He also said, "No one ever gave so much of himself away that he did not have more to give."

Reflection Questions:

How does "having" mark the habits and values of your life?

How do you practice "being" in the world rather than having?

How has God opened your heart?



The Rt. Rev. Dan Edwards is the bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Nevada.



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Proper 26
Mark 12:28-34

The scribe challenged Jesus. The concept of a challenge is something that you and I face every day. Some of the challenges we face are simple for us as I rather imagine this one was for Jesus.

Our culture today has turned the idea of a challenge into an enormously successful and highly profitable marketing scheme.

To turn the television on most any evening of the week a viewer is likely to confront a program built entirely around a challenge.

Perhaps the challenge is about “Dancing with the Stars,” or the competition for “American Idol,” or even winning huge sums of money at the challenge of poker, or simply singing with your voice. I do not remember as a child ever being confronted with the abundance of challenges that are so pervasive today. Rarely do I have a whole week pass without having a friend describe in some detail the athletic challenge he or she just met. It might be a walkathon, a marathon, a triathlon; but it always centers on succeeding by meeting the objective challenge placed before them.

My friend Marek Zabriskie, rector of St. Thomas Church Whitemarsh, has developed from his parish in Philadelphia a world fellowship he calls “The Bible Challenge.” I accused him of finding such phenomenal success in his program solely because he named it a challenge. Few folks in our tradition ever even entertain the idea of Bible reading unless linked up with a personal test or challenge. To read the entire Bible cover to cover every year sounds most unusual in our Anglican tradition.

We need to place the whole idea of stewardship into our culture’s craving to meet a challenge. Would a parish respond to the idea of a tithe challenge? How many people would sign up if it were offered as a personal challenge similar to the Bible reading fellowship?

Jesus responded clearly to his scribe’s challenge. He met it and satisfied his hearers. You and I have never offered a tithe as a challenge. It has become an obligation outside our response. Doctors know full well that it is not enough just to tell a



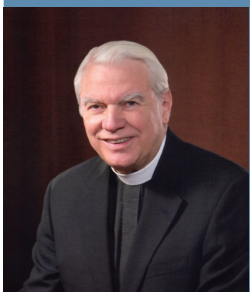
patient to lose weight, stop smoking, exercise, or even drink moderately. The physician also knows that when framed as a challenge, a directive contains an utterly different form of motivation that strikes to the very core of our current dominant culture. Stewardship needs to adapt to that culture. This time the challenge comes from Jesus to us.

Reflection Questions:

How would a tithing challenge work in your parish?

Would taking on the challenge of a tithe bring satisfaction like that with an athletic challenge?

Have you ever personally felt that God was challenging you to give more?



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*The Feast of All Saints
John 11:32-44*

When Jesus found out that his friend Lazarus was dead, he started his journey toward “unbinding” him. Jesus had been teaching and showing his followers the abundance of living in God’s realm. God gives life, not takes it. God releases resources, not buries them. God expects us to circulate and “flow” our gifts, not bind and restrict them. Perhaps Jesus was “greatly disturbed in spirit” because of the way the people around him resisted his movement toward showing God’s abundance. First they declared Lazarus dead and buried him; there was no hope and there was nothing anyone could do. Then they blamed Jesus for his death: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus insisted that they take away the stone, they complained: “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.”

How often do we use the same techniques to resist giving and releasing our resources? We might say: How can we give when we

are still grieving our loss. We blame it on the bad economy. Some of us blame God for not doing something to turn our economy around. In fear of losing more, we lock up our resources. And yet, we complain that it might smell really bad if we open it since we instinctively know that by stopping the flow of resources, they will decay and turn rotten. Resources are like water: When it doesn’t flow, it turns rotten and smells and becomes opportunities for destructive things to grow.

Jesus finally confronts us by naming the heart of the issue: “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”

Do you believe in God the giver? Do you believe in the abundance that Jesus had shown us? Do you believe in the resurrection? When we believe in the abundance of God, we can have the courage to open and unbind our resources. In doing so, we join Jesus,



with all the saints in the past and in the future, in becoming the extension of God the Giver causing resources to flow and rejuvenate our lives, communities and creation.

Reflection Questions:

In what ways do you resist giving and releasing your resources?

How has giving in the past opened your heart to God and others?

What steps might you take to “unbind” your spirit of generosity and abundance?



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Proper 25
Mark 10:46-52

It was Saturday afternoon. I was taking a solitary walk in the historic area of Philadelphia when I encountered a handicapped beggar on the street. He was sitting with his legs sprawled. His tattered clothes and unkempt appearance repelled me. I tried to ignore him, hoping not to be noticed. But that was not to be. He yelled out, "Sister, stop and talk to me!" I paused, knowing God was watching and waiting for my response.

I reluctantly approached him to look squarely in his face. As I bent down he grabbed a cross hanging around my neck and asked, "Are you a Christian?" Stunned, I replied "Yes." I asked if he, too, was a Christian and he replied, "Oh yes, and let me tell you everything God has done for me." What flowed out of his soul was a litany of blessings, healings, provision and gratitude for never being without the necessities of life. He then asked my name and for my prayers. I reciprocated. My tears welled up as the encounter drew to a close. I put money into his cup and said goodbye.

But he wasn't finished with me. As I walked away he yelled out, "Mary, I love you!"

I stopped dead in my tracks. This broken, gentle man was a messenger from God! It was as if God were directly speaking to me and saying, "Mary, can't you see that I am the source, the giver of every good and necessary thing in your life? You have cried out many times asking for mercy and blessing and I have granted them to you. And above all, I love you."

This profound encounter 17 years ago changed me. No longer do I give or serve out of obligation or duty, but out of a deep gratitude for God's generosity. Giving of my life and my resources has become pure joy.

Mark 10:46-52 tells the story of Bartimaeus, a blind beggar who was not afraid to cry out to Jesus for mercy and healing. Nothing would stop him from asking for what he needed. Jesus heard his cry of faith and healed him. In return, Bartimaeus became a follower. Both Bartimaeus and the man



I encountered were deeply aware of God's mercy and provision in their lives and were so thankful.

Let us be bold and cry out to God when we are in need! For God's other name is Giver. Our new name will be Thankful.

Reflection Questions:

Recall a time you were deeply aware of God's provision in your life.

How has God the Giver been exemplified in your life story?

Do you give out of obligation or thankfulness?



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*The Feast of St. Francis
Matthew 11:25-30*

As a lover of “all creatures great and small” I have long been in the St. Francis of Assisi fan club. The tradition of celebrating our reverence for, and interdependence with, all of God’s creation is one that felt instantly familiar and coherent to me when I first learned of St. Francis as a college student. My paternal grandfather, raised on the Shinnecock Indian reservation in New York, had very early on instilled in me a respect and care for all of creation. It wasn’t until much later that I understood the fullness of St. Francis’ story and what the example of his life meant for my relationship and stewardship of things temporal too.

It is not lost on me that the Church has been hesitant to have festivals celebrating the embracing of “Lady Poverty” as St. Francis did. To reflect and pray about his rejection of the wealth and privilege to which he was born requires shining what is too often a convicting light on my own relationship to “stuff” and money. Yet, to

embrace St. Francis is to ask questions that bring me face to face with Jesus: can I practice enough non-attachment to walk away from the “stuff”—the smartphone, the wardrobe, the worldly comforts—in order to serve others more generously? What does a life of “self-giving” really look like in 2015? What do I need to let go of in order to see the world in all of its pain and glory, differently?

There is a space between just celebrating the feast day of St. Francis and walking away from our possessions and joining the Franciscan order in which the church is invited to dwell. This space, long occupied by Jesus, is one that requires us to continually assess what, if anything, is getting in the way of our care for others and all creation. Generosity with whatever we may have begins with the ability to see and revere God’s creation. I believe this is part of the ongoing essential work of stewardship. This work takes more than a feast day to take



root. I like to wonder what the world might be like if we took on the spiritual practice of seeing, caring and giving as a daily, year-long way of living and then celebrated St. Francis as a true stewardship feast. And because stewardship is a function of addition and not subtraction, of course we would still bless the animals.

Reflection Questions:

How does the life of Francis of Assisi invite you to reflect on your relationship to money and possessions?

How might you and your church community embrace the fuller narrative and example of St. Francis’ life?

In what ways might care for all of creation ignite generosity?



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