

The Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

October 27, 2013

The Rev. Robert H. Malm

## Cheerful Giving

Issues of money and stewardship have always been complicated and challenging for people of faith. The reality of the poor, the oppressed, those experiencing natural disaster and/or political turmoil has been and always will be a part of our life. Jesus told his disciples, “...*the poor will always be with you...*” (John 12:18). In the Judeo-Christian tradition we know that we are called to do all we can to help others, and to work for justice and economic equality and opportunity.

St. Paul realized this after his conversion. His concern was to evangelize the Gentiles, non-Jews, so they might embrace the Christian faith. But he also knew the call to help the needy. Right after the first Pentecost, those who had wealth shared with those in need (Acts 4:24). As Paul travelled around the Mediterranean Sea, he asked the Gentile communities to assist the poor back in Jerusalem. In Jerusalem there were a number of widows, orphans and poor. When a severe famine struck, there was even greater need.

So Paul tried to convince the Gentile and Jewish communities that they were one in Christ. To the Corinthians Paul preached to give generously for the relief of those in Jerusalem. He wrote, “...*sow bountifully that you may reap bountifully...*” (2 Cor. 9:6). And he told the Corinthians, you should not give reluctantly or under compulsion...God loves a “*cheerful giver...*” (2 Cor. 9:7). Before Paul could continue his mission to Rome, and further west to Spain, he had to support the needs of the community in Jerusalem.

Going back to Jerusalem to bring resources to try to help the needy really brought Paul into conflict with the authorities. They convicted him of perverting the faith and associating with Gentiles who would never embrace Judaism. So Paul was arrested and sent by Roman guard back to Rome, where he could appeal to Caesar.

While in Rome, Paul realized his time was almost up. He wrote to Timothy in the hope that Timothy might come and assist him in his captivity. Paul knew his life is almost over, “...*I have fought the fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith...*”

Paul’s trust in God’s saving love sustained him through these days of challenge and suffering.

Jesus tried to teach his disciples and get them to live in loving trust, knowing God will sustain us, deliver us, save us. In many of his parables Jesus contrasts the self-righteousness of the Pharisees with the complete trust of those who knew their need of God, “...*be merciful to me a sinner...*” It is the tax collector who knows the joy, the cheerfulness of opening his heart to God. The very first line of the Sermon on the Mount is “*Blessed are the poor in Spirit...*” or “*Blessed are those who know their need of God...*” (Matthew 5:3).

Each day I get a message sent to my computer by the Society of St. John the Evangelist. Three days ago I read this post,

*“God gives us our lives, ourselves. In gratitude we offer ourselves as an oblation to God. In gratitude God returns ourselves to us transformed. The engine of transformation is the current of mutual gratitude and mutual self giving that flows from creator to creature.”*

Joy comes in this gratitude, in this oblation, in this transformation; in this gift between God and God’s people.

Each year when I come to this Sunday, one week before Pledge Sunday, I think of Father Geoffrey Stoddart-Kennedy’s wonderful hymn (#9 in the Hymnal). Father Kennedy was born in 1883 in Ireland and became an Anglican Priest. He served in a small parish before becoming a chaplain for the British Army in World War I. He served for more than three years and became the most famous chaplain of the war, going from trench to trench in the battlefields of France, taking Holy Communion and bringing comfort to the wounded and dying. He even brought “Woodbine” cigarettes and was given the nickname, “Woodbine Willy.” He died less than 10 years after the war ended at the age of 46!

As he wrote the last verse of his famous hymn, I’m sure he thought of the soldiers he visited in the trenches of France,

*“...to give and give and give again, what God hath given thee. To spend thyself nor count the cost; to serve right gloriously the God who gave all the worlds that are, and all that are to be...”*

The theological reasons to make your pledge to Grace church for 2014 include knowing and serving our loving God. In giving we experience transformation, and our gifts transform the world. Jesus and Paul teach us the same lesson: there is no discipleship without stewardship, following Jesus means making sacrifices, giving generously.

The practical reasons for making your pledge to Grace are first, we need your money. We cannot carry out our mission and ministry without your financial gifts. Pledges count for more than 90% of our income. Second, the Vestry cannot make out a realistic budget without a sense of what we will receive in the year ahead. This budget includes 10 program areas, property and staff. We can’t plan for the new year without knowing what you plan to donate in your pledge.

As you consider your gift to Grace, consider Father Kennedy’s words, *“...to give and give and give again, what God hath given thee...”*

Sirach 35:12-17

Psalm 103:1-8

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

Luke 18:9-14