

Church of the Good Shepherd
and
St. John the Evangelist

17 Pentecost
September 7, 2008
Fr. Bill McGinty

“Come to Church!”

Every year at this time your Vestry gets together and begins to assess the year. Between now and the Annual Meeting in November, every ministry in the church will draw up a report on itself. Successes, failures, hopes, dreams and finances all come under scrutiny.

As Rector I send a report to Diocesan House hoping that the Bishop reads it prior to his visit at the end of October. This year there is much to write about because it has been the first year of Shared Ministry and the Vision of the Parish Project. There is now no area of parish life that remains untouched by Shared Ministry or the Wellness Manual.

Today it is my duty commissioned by the Vestry to speak about Stewardship and the needs of the parish for the coming year.

Traditionally, in every parish in the Episcopal Church, the Rector stands up on Stewardship Sunday and gives a sermon on Stewardship and Pledge Drive and is meant to inspire us to give back to God from the many gifts he has given to us. We are told that, our giving is “a covenant between our selves and God” and cements a special relationship of love.

Looking back over the last five years there have been some wonderful and deeply moving sermons on stewardship, original, caring and thought provoking. Last year’s sermon was so good; it provoked me to tell Maryann that we should increase our pledge. I was so pleased last year that I looked forward to the Pledge Drive with eager anticipation.

“How would the Parish respond to a great Stewardship sermon?” I wondered. Well thirteen people decided not to pledge at all, from the previous year, leaving us with 39 pledges and four of those decided to cut their pledge by 50%. I kept counting the pledge cards over and over hoping I had made a mistake, but I hadn’t.

Financially, in the last year we have struggled. The previous year’s pledge fell short of its promised amount. In the last year 39 people have supported a church of 206 people. For most of the year we have struggled to pay the payroll. On three occasions the Child Care bailed us out, and in June and July we switched the Child Care rent fee to cover payroll, forcing the Organ Fund to pay the monthly organ loan to the Pennstar Bank.

We should have been able to pay our way, even with the Pledge Drive of 39 people, but through December 2 until the beginning of March, many people didn’t come to church. Low turnout and low pledge and plate meant that we were unable to meet either payroll, or our bills.

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You might ask why we pledge at all? The answer is simple. A pledge allows the bookkeeper and the Treasurer to know how much money they have to budget for the year. The year picked up again around Easter, but numbers declined again in June and have remained relatively poor ever since.

I really don't care about the money side of this; I care that people don't come to church. I care that your life and mine is so packed and exciting that we cannot put aside one hour of our week to worship our God.

(And here I must pause, stop and apologize because the people who rally need to hear this are not here this morning to hear it.)

A member asked me recently, how do you feel when only 43 people turn up for the 10 o' clock service and I told her: "Disappointed! Sad and insulted!" Disappointed for them, that God their creator merits such a low status on their weekly order of priorities. Sad for so many of this congregation, who over five hard years, have worked tirelessly to give them a better church and insulted to offer God our Father so little praise after all he has given to us.

Chief among our priorities for Stewardship must be our time, the time we give to God. It is more important than anything else, it is our covenant with the God, who loves us. It is the respect and honor we show to those who stand and worship with us.

Last year in a meeting of December 2, in the Vestry room, someone said: "The one thing about Fr. Bill is that even if you have an accident in Newark and you end up in Westchester, Morristown or Denville, come out of your coma and he will be the face standing at the foot of your bed. How can we thank him?"

Well, I don't want your thanks. I want you to come to church. Whether you are happy, sad, grieving or in despair, funny, ugly, cranky or bad tempered. Republican, Democratic, lawyer or bus boy, I want you to come to church, because in church, there is someone who can do more for you than I ever could. In church the grace of God's Spirit, the Spirit of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, can touch your heart.

When is any one of us ever going to realize that our life is not our own? We do not dictate events, we do not decide the important moments of our life, God does. We need our God. We need him more than we will ever know. Like an unfaithful spouse we play fast and loose with him. We bow low when we truly need him, and at other times will willingly swap him for a cooked breakfast at Perkins.

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Do not pledge this year, because you heard a sermon or because the church you say you love, has struggled financially in the last year. Pledge because in Stewardship you can pause long enough to thank God for all he has given to you

Do not pledge this year because you feel guilty that the one worshipping next to you is carrying your financial burden.

Pledge because in Stewardship you get to carry your brother's burden and he needs you.

Do not pledge this year because this year you think you have something left over to give to your God. Your God does not want your leftovers. Your God wants your love.

Pledge this year because you budgeted God into your annual statement.

Do not pledge this year because God is a tax write off that you can give if you come to church.

Pledge because it hurts a little, the way taking care of the kids college hurts, but you do it with a sense of honor and pride.

If you are not going to come to church, do not pledge. God wants you more than your money. We are a church of God, we are something divine. We can always find money, we cannot find another you.

Pledge. Don't pledge. Just come to church.

Give. Don't give. Just come to church.

Where else can you go, where everyone knows your name? Where else can you go where people will love you?

Walk into the office. No one says: "I love you. Glad to see you. Welcome. Hoots, we barely get that treatment at home. Come to church. Come and be a part of the family of Christ.

Support the Yankees. Sooner or later they stop winning. Follow the Cubs or the Blue Jays and they never win. Be faithful to the Jets. Year after miserable year and you will touch the base of all despair.

Yet, you know, deep in your heart, that Jesus your Christ your Savior has never ever let you down. In the entire world he has been your inspiration. He has been the word on your lips at the moment of sad loss and crisis: "Jesus save me!" are the words you rehearse for that last breath that leaves your body.

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Today kneeling here before the cross of he who died for you, pledge, pledge 52 hours of your time to his most glorious service. Write it across the flesh of your heart: "Jesus my Lord I am 52 times devoted to you."

Now go keep that pledge and see the interest it returns.

Amen+