Stewardship Sermon
September 28, 2008

I'm going to talk about Stewardship today, stewardship of money; and since that's a pretty personal subject, and since I know that many of you know a lot more about it, and are farther along with it than I am; I thought that, this first time, I would try and tell some of my own story about stewardship—so this isn't exactly a sermon, except in a few places.

It amazes me today, but I never learned anything about stewardship in seminary. Not in classes, not in field work, not in clinical training, not in chapel, not in retreats or quiet days, nowhere. It was like it didn't exist. Come to think of it, I didn't learn anything about stewardship *before* seminary, either—not at home, or in church. (So, in rebellion, I've been trying to change that for a while.)

I started my Ordained ministry as an associate at Grace Church in Muskogee, OK; and I started it in total ignorance around the whole subject of the theology of money. I *thought* I had some theology about most everything else, but nothing about money.

In Muskogee, Kathleen and I gave because we knew we should. The amount we gave we sort of pulled out of the air; and it seemed rather a lot—it was more than many of our monthly bills. But at the same time we really had no idea about how much we were *supposed* to give, or why we should give—beyond the business of keeping the church going. I do remember one Rector's Stewardship sermon about how much per day it cost to run the church. It was a lot. It's still a lot. (In fact, our initial budget numbers for next year suggest that it will cost us right at $1,180 a day to run St. Nicholas' at the level of ministry that we are aiming for.)

Impressive as that was, (and is), it wasn't all that I wanted to know about my giving. Something was missing.

Then, in 1978 we went to Cursillo—(this was so long ago that the chicken was still an egg). One of the things they talked about toward the end of this short course in Christianity was what went into the daily living of our faith. They talked about piety, learning, and service. And they said that Stewardship was a part of piety—of personal spirituality. That turned on a big light for me.

Stewardship was like saying my prayers; it was the same sort of spiritual discipline. I knew a little bit, even back then, about saying my prayers. I knew that it was a struggle and that I didn't always do what I thought I ought to do. And I also knew that it was important, and that what happened with it really mattered. But putting that perspective to stewardship was new; it was powerful, and it did stuff to me. For the first time, I had a place to begin with the whole business of giving. (Now, while I am talking about myself, Kathleen is a central part of this story, and she has had as much to do with our family decisions as I have.)

Since that Cursillo, I've done a lot of reading and study and prayer and work and prayer on stewardship. But the turning point for me was that insight that my stewardship was primarily about my relationship with God, and not primarily about the budget. Here are a few of the things about Stewardship that I have learned since then. (There are a lot more, and, you'll doubtless be hearing more of them in the years ahead—this is just a start.)

I've learned that my giving has to do primarily with my response to God for God's goodness and love to me. There has been a lot of that goodness and love. And I've learned that I need to be mindful of God's goodness, intentionally mindful; otherwise, I'll take it for granted.

After all, like most Episcopalians, I was born on third base, believing that I'd hit a triple. But most everything is really gift. God has been very good to me. That's the heart of it.

Thanksgiving is the spiritual key here—stewardship can help move us toward understanding our lives in terms of thanksgiving, toward looking first and hardest at what we have, rather that at what we don't have.

I have learned that giving based on what I receive, proportional giving or giving a percent of income, does a better job than anything else of reminding me that I am giving out of thanksgiving. To be sure, there are also a bunch of practical advantages to proportional giving, (it's not all that hard to move the decimal point one place to the left); but the main reason I like it is theological. It reminds me why I give; it helps me give thanks. I give from what I have received, based on what I have received, in thanksgiving for what I have received. That works for me.

I have also learned that giving is like prayer in a bunch of ways. For one thing, in both I am much more likely to change my attitude by changing my behavior than I am likely to change my behavior by changing my attitude. As a rule, we human beings tend to act our way into new ways of thinking; we don't all that often think our way into new ways of acting.

And, since we're really talking about virtue and character here, the issue with both disciplines—prayer and stewardship—as with so many other such things, is not what I want to do, or what I feel like doing at the moment. The issue is what I choose to do and what I in fact do, I the long run, and the effect that has on me over time.

I have learned a bit more about the power and the importance of money in my life, in our life as a family, and in our culture. This is a real issue, as we have seen with especial clarity this last week. Just as with our time and our bodies and our talents, what we do with our money matters. It shapes us as human beings—for better or for worse. That's why Jesus talked about it so much. I have learned that one of the best ways to take away the power of money is by giving it away, by using it as a tool of compassion, and not as a means of power or self-identity.

I have learned that, while the Old Testament minimum standard of giving is the tithe, the New Testament standard of giving is different. The New Testament standard of giving is not the tithe; it's the cross. The tithe is just there to help us get going. While tithing is a good and useful thing, the cross (and resurrection) hang over it all.

At the same time, I have learned that questions like before or after taxes, gross or net, and so on, while important, are best left to the individual to work out with God; and that there are no one-size-fits-all answers. And sure, it doesn't all have to go to the church—it just needs to be given away.

So, where has all of this led us? | | What Kathleen and I did was simple, not always easy, but simple. We made a decision and we made a plan. The decision was to accept, as a start, the Old Testament standard, and to tithe. We found out where we were—in terms of what percentage of our incomes we were giving away, and we increased that percentage each year until we got there. As it turned out, it wasn't that hard. The check to the church is the first check I write each month; and we've found that living on 90% is no harder, and no easier, that living on 100%. We have been doing this for many years now, and it has made a real difference. It has also given us a big part of what we have tried to teach our son about money.

Now, I gotta admit that sometimes it's a pain. Sometimes I resent that money going out when there is stuff I want or think I need. Other times, tithing feels especially good—like when I'm preaching on it. But that's alright, and, again, it doesn't matter so much how I feel about it at the moment—what matters is what we decide, what we choose to do. Still, most of the time, we have stopped giving until it hurts and started giving until it feels good. After all, there's no room in any of this for guilt.

Anyway, that's a bit of my, of our journey in terms of stewardship, especially stewardship of money. It personal, but it's also theological. It has to do with discovering a way to live out our faith in this difficult and important area. It's been a very positive and helpful journey, a journey I invite you to join.