

Consecration Sunday

The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
The Reverend Daniel M. Yeiser, Ph.D.

October 22/23, 2005
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18; Psalm 1;
1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46

Good morning. It is great to be with you. I am Pastor Danny Yeiser from St. Matthew in Hanover, and I do extend to you cordial and heartfelt greetings from St. Matthew Lutheran Church, your sister in the faith. It is great for us to be able engage in this pulpit exchange today. Pastor Hardy has probably wrapped up his sermon by now, as our late service starts at 10:30. It is a wonderful opportunity for both of us to visit with each other's congregations; we are friends, going clear back to our days in seminary; we graduated together. I am fairly new to this Synod, I've only been in this Synod for a little over a year, but certainly one of the highlights for me has been the opportunity to renew my friendship with Pastor Hardy. He is a great pastor, and he is certainly blessed with wonderful colleagues in Pastors Brock and Easton. Let us pray. Lord God, please continue to move us to be faithful stewards. Amen.

Many, many years ago (in fact several decades), when I was worshiping at my home church near Pittsburgh, my grandfather came up to me after the service and said, "How would you like to earn this?" It was a dollar bill. Now back in those days and for someone of my age, that was very, very significant and I thought, Oh, what an opportunity!, so I said, "Yeah, I'd like to earn it. What do I have to do, Grandpa?" He gave me a slip of paper and said, "Here's a poem. Memorize this poem, recite it to me next Sunday and if you get it right, you get the dollar."

I worked hard all week long at memorizing that poem, and then after the worship service we retired into the church's library; I said the poem to his satisfaction, and he gave me the dollar. Next we went our separate ways in the building. I went out to the narthex and bumped into a couple of friends of mine and I was showing off my dollar that I had worked so hard through the week to earn. As we were talking, an usher came walking by with the plate in his hand . . . I don't know to this day if it was some type of reflexive movement on my part or if the Spirit was very much present, moving me . . . but at any rate, as the usher was walking by, in motion, I deposited my dollar into the plate. He looked surprised, and my friends said, "Why did you do that? Are you crazy?" Even my mother, who is a very good steward, when she heard what had happened, said to me, "I can't believe you did that". But my grandfather caught wind of what had happened, and he approached me as I was getting ready to leave the building and said, "You know, that's giving it back to where it came from". I have never forgotten what he said, and that stewardship message of his has impacted me significantly in my life. Notice the sub-theme there; the sub-theme might be that we are never too young to learn about stewardship. I was only about ten or eleven years old, and the message has stuck through all these years.

Stewardship means using everything that God has given us – our talents, our possessions, our very lives – to serve God with love and gratitude. Certainly our lessons for today get at that, do they not? In our gospel lesson we are treated to that twin commandment of love – the shema, which comes from Deuteronomy 6, love the Lord your God with everything you have, basically, with your whole being; and love your neighbor as yourself, based on the text from our first lesson, Leviticus 19. As stewards, we love God, we love our neighbor, as we give our time, talents and possessions.

However, many don't really like or appreciate this subject of stewardship. I know of a pastor who, when he was interviewing with a call committee, was actually told, "If you come here to be

our pastor, we do not want you to preach any stewardship sermons, especially the kind that talk about money". I know of another congregation where, because they were in the black after the long dog-days of the summer (That would be a nice problem to have, wouldn't it?), decided to cancel their fall stewardship emphasis. And many of my own colleagues will not broach the subject of financial stewardship; they have too much anxiety and worry about doing so. Which I find to be somewhat ironic considering that so many of Jesus' parables deal with the subject of money. And I find it somewhat incredible, too, that we don't seem to mind discussions about discipleship; a disciple is a student, or learner; as Christians, we are first and foremost followers, students, learners of Jesus Christ. And we emphasize this, even to the point of talking about our cross bearing and how we suffer for the gospel. My point is that we don't do our discipleship in a vacuum, but rather with the time, talents, and yes, possessions with which we have been blessed by God. So discipleship and stewardship go hand-in-hand; you really can't have the one without the other.

Now, it may be true that preaching about time and talent isn't as unsettling (or might we say threatening?) to folks as preaching about possessions. So what is it, then, about money that makes financial stewardship sermons upsetting or disturbing to some, not many, people? Is it because we think that, of all the things we have in life, this surely is the one thing we should be able to control or have a say over, even over the mission and ministry of the church, this should be ours? Indeed, remember our gospel lesson just a week or so ago, we have trouble even rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's. But we are called to be holistic in our stewardship, not just one way or the other, so the person who says, "I give a lot of my time, I give a lot of my talents to my church, somebody else can pick up the tab" is missing a very real and important dimension of stewardship. Conversely, the person who say, "I gave my tithe, don't ask me for my time or talents" is also being short-sighted.

So, as we focus on the stewardship of finances on this your consecration Sunday (we call it stewardship Sunday at my church), we raise the question, "Why should we give money to the church?" Well, the first reason has just been intimated: we're called to do it. The common church term is "tithing". What is a tithe? It's a voluntary, systematic contribution of financial support to your church. Note the words "voluntary" and "systematic".

The Old Testament guideline for giving was a tithe, or a tenth of one's total property. The tithe is constantly held out as a regulation and as a norm in the Old Testament. We can read about it in any number of places there. We note it's importance even in Genesis 28, very early in the Bible, it's laid out for us where Jacob says to God, "And of all that you give me I will surely give one tenth to you."

In the church, tithing was made compulsory around the fourth century and remained so until the 16th century with the reformation, where it in many churches it was no longer obligatory, and maybe that was a good thing. But in the New Testament, Jesus never contradicted the validity and the importance of the tithe. Jesus affirmed tithing as a form of stewardship. He encouraged giving in proportion to what we have received, praising that poor widow for the generous offering that she made at the temple. This poor widow gave it all, gave her last couple of coins, to the temple for the support of God's work in and through that place. And Jesus was so overwhelmed by what she had done that He made her a great example of stewardship, in trust and a surrendering of the self to God, she gives. And gives, knowing that God will not abandon her.

St. Paul directed his followers to plan their contributions. In other words, be systematic. Now this idea of proportionate giving is stressed much today, as you know. And it certainly does have merit, for it moves us to look at our own situation, or the situation of our family; not be so

worried about competing with others. For you see, people can be even more generous givers than others who are giving more dollars than they are, if they are giving more of what they have. We encourage folks, and certainly your pledge card does this, to work toward or even beyond the tithe. A tithe is not a ceiling on giving, we don't put ceilings on giving. I know people who are really pretty hard up who give even more than I'm giving as a tither; they give beyond that, maybe 11 or 12%. But the average Lutheran gives between two and three percent and maybe to jump to a tithe may seem insurmountable to you, then I encourage you as your pledge card gives you the opportunity to do, to move it up maybe a percent for next year, or maybe two percent, and work your way towards being a tither or beyond a tither. You know, we talk about money problems in churches, just imagine the ministry and mission that could go on here or at St. Matthew in Hanover if we all tithed. It would be indescribable. Even if everybody gave just five percent across the board, we would have more money than we would know what to do with.

We also give out of practical necessity. The church has many, many expenses which are reflected in your annual budget. There is compensation, utilities (for my church, utilities alone comes to over \$60,000), there are supplies, and there is maintenance to do. And there is that line item on our budget (which ideally should be at the very top of our budget) for benevolence, the dollars that go from us to our Synod, to the ELCA, special benevolences to support such things as Hurricane Katrina relief. With our benevolence dollars, we are practicing our Lord's commandment that we read in our lessons today, to love our neighbor, a very concrete way to do just that.

Many people complain that "all the church wants is our money". Well that's just not true, and I think that's a lame excuse for not being a church-goer or member. We want a lot more than just that; we need a lot more than just that; we partner in a lot more than just that. But it is true that we want peoples' dollars. Why? Because there is nowhere else for us to get funding; we're not going to receive it from the government, and it's not really fair for us to go to wealthy people in our community who aren't members of our church and ask them to support the ministry of our church.

And yet in the words of St. Paul there is "a still more excellent way". For you see, a third reason that we suggest for tithing or giving to the church (and remember our definition of stewardship), is out of love and gratitude for all that God does for us. When we give from this faith standpoint, we give lovingly, gratefully and joyfully – not begrudgingly – to our God in whom we are totally dependent for life and salvation. Another way to put it is to say, in the words of our offertory prayer from the LBW, "We offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us – ourselves, our time and our possessions, signs of your gracious love. Receive them for the sake of him who offered himself for us, Jesus Christ, our Lord." Know where the initiative is there – it's on God's part; know what Christ has done for us – He paid the ultimate price for us, the sacrifice for us.

But what if . . . what if you're just not there yet spiritually? What if you're thinking, "You can talk all you want about joyful giving, Pastor, I don't feel any happiness or exhilaration or pleasure when I put my offering envelope or currency into the plate." Don't lose heart if that's where you are. I encourage you, then, to go ahead and still give – give out of that sense of duty or responsibility, but do be open, please be open, to where the Spirit may be leading you in your spiritual and faith journey.

Today on this consecration Sunday, I encourage you to ponder the spiritual meaning and significance of the offering. The offering isn't a business interlude two-thirds of the way into the worship service, it's not some type of unfortunate practical necessity that we need to deal with, this is a true act of worship in which we, who have heard the word preached, heard the word

read, have prayed, and have experienced God's love and grace for us in song, now have the opportunity to respond to the grace of God in our lives as we are moved by the spirit to contribute to God's work through our financial gifts. Symbolically speaking, as you put your gift into the plate, you are giving of yourself to God and to God's work in this world. As you deposit your offerings and your pledge cards today, trust that God loves you, trust that God will take care of you, and trust that God will always be there for you.

You know, there's really no such thing as an ex-tither. Nobody has ever come to me and said, "Look. I followed your suggestions about tithing and it ran my family into the ground." I know of no one who has ever said that. In fact, people who tithe tell me just the opposite, they find they have even more money left over, that by being so organized, they are able to make better sense of their financial situation and regulate it more completely and in a better way than they could when they were not tithing or moving towards the tithe. In fact, they grow in their awareness and understanding of other people in the world who are in need.

May we all prayerfully grow in our lives of stewardship, taking joy in serving our Lord and Savior in this time and place, while always knowing that we are not alone, for our loving God is with us forever. Amen.