

Why I Give

Proper 18, Year C – Luke 14:25-33

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, September 8, 2013

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

When I first looked at this morning's Gospel lesson earlier this week, I thought, "Oh, great, didn't we just have the Hard sayings of Jesus?" And here it is again with the "you've got to hate your family and your life" thing. [Sigh!] Then I got to the end of the reading, to the, "so therefore." "None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions," Jesus concludes, and I thought, "Oh, great, the pledge cards just went out this week!" In the end, rather than preach another sermon so soon about the cost of the cross and the cost of discipleship, I thought I'd spend these few moments just sharing with you again why I send in my little blue card, why I give to the Church.

Oh, I saw that smirk. I know that for many of you, the first thought that flew through your head, though I hope you were charitable enough to dismiss it quickly, was that I give to the Church because it is expected of me. Maybe that is the first reason you would think of for why *you* give. But think about it; other than the counters who take turns providing due diligence when Judy is making up the deposit on Tuesday mornings, none of you would know if I gave or not, and certainly not how much. What's more, the same can be said for any of you. There is a great difference of opinion among pastors as to whether it is a good idea to know how much each member of the church gives. Some argue that giving is a barometer of each individual's spiritual health and should be monitored. Others argue that knowing that information is bound to play on the pastor's human nature and erode pastoral impartiality. While I agree that giving is a sign of health, I mostly agree with the second argument and make it a point *not* to know how much any of you pledge or give. As your pastor, I want to be a good example, but no, your expectation isn't really why I give.

So, why *do* I give to the Church? I guess you could say that I grew up a tither from my flannelgraph days in Sunday School. (If you don't know about flannelgraph, I'm sorry for you. Ask any older former Sunday School teacher and they'll clue you in.) Since I was little, I knew that the tithe was the standard of giving to the Church. I don't remember how old I was when it happened, but I remember when the IRS audited my Dad because they didn't believe that he tithed. The IRS refused to believe that a school teacher with five kids making \$7,500 a year, would give *away* seven hundred, fifty of it – until he went in with the cancelled checks. I remember that when I was given a ten-cent-a-week allowance, it was given to me as ten pennies, so I could put one of them in the offering plate. Tithing wasn't an option in the Martindale family, it was just the way it was – a habit, just like brushing our teeth every morning and evening. But though I continue the lifelong habit of giving a set portion, a percentage of my income to the Church, that really isn't why I give.

So, why do I give to the Church? As the one responsible to you and to your Vestry for monitoring the Parish budget, I suppose I have to admit that part of my commitment to giving is based on knowing full well what the expenses are. We want to gather in a clean, well-maintained, comfortable, and even *beautiful* space. That costs money. We want someone to answer the phone when we have a question, or some news to share, or a request to make. That costs money. We want to make a difference in our community, in our Diocese, and around the world. That costs money. We want Sunday School to teach our children and our grandchildren. We want a youth program to attract and inform our young people as they grow. We want programs of education, suppers and breakfasts, and fellowship for all ages. We want a music program that helps make God present to us. All that costs money. And as your administrator, I know how *much* each of those cost. But my own gift is just a small portion of that, so that isn't really why I give.

So, why do I give to the Church? Let's face it, there are a lot other ways I could give my money and have it do good. Every week I get at least a half dozen mailings from organizations that would like me to give – The United Way, the Red Cross, the Boy Scouts, the March of Dimes – the list goes on and on. They all make a difference. I have no doubt whatsoever, that nearly every one of those organizations use the money that I send them more efficiently than the Church can. And though Johns Hopkins is not the huge concern that UK or Louisville or Western Kentucky is, I am sure that my *alma mater*, like yours, contributes much more to education than the Church is able. I try to be as generous in giving to as many of these organizations as I can be. But though we may not always be the most efficient, the Church does one thing that none of these other organizations can. Whether in education or social action, the Church acts in the name of Jesus Christ. In *all* her actions, the Church has but a single clear and concise mission – to spread the Good News of Christ. It is because of that one fact that none of those fine organizations comes before my giving to the Church, not on a periodic basis, nor in my estate planning.

But even that is not really why I give to the Church. When it comes right down to it, it's not just because it's expected. It's not just because it's a habit. It's not just because I know how much "doing church" costs. It's not *even* because the Church does its work in the name of Christ. I give to the Church because Jesus Christ loved me, when there really was nothing worth loving. I give to the Church because he freed me from my seemingly unending cycle of self-indulgence, and self-loathing, and self-centeredness, and taught me how to love. I give to the Church, because it is *here* that I have found not just Sunday morning entertainment and Wednesday evening fellowship, not just social programs and the chance to learn and to grow, it is here, right *here*, that I have found love... and freedom... and salvation. I give to the Church because the fire that at times absolutely consumes my heart and soul, didn't come from habit, or from cost effectiveness, or even from an ultimate cause, it came from the consuming power of Jesus Christ to take a life that at its core wasn't worth saving, and made it something worth loving. Why do I give to the Church? Because I simply *must*.

This afternoon, or tomorrow, or later this week, as we look at that simple blue card, as we look at whether and how much of our financial resources we should pledge to the work of the Church in the coming year, as we consecrate that gift, make holy our commitment to giving, I hope you will ask yourself seriously, And prayerfully, that same simple question. Why do *you* give?