

Your Church Wants YOU

11/14/2021

Rev. Jeff Mansfield



Preaching on:

Luke 12:22–34

Next week is our Consecration Sunday—that's the Sunday which ends our Stewardship Season and it's the Sunday when we all turn in our pledge cards for 2022 so that the Finance team, ably led by Pam Figlar, can get busy putting together a budget for our ministries and programs for next year. Traditionally, that means this week you get a sermon on giving and generosity and pitching in and all that stuff. But we decided that we weren't really going to focus on all that stuff too much this year. Our theme this Stewardship Season is "Into the Heart of It All." And here's the motivation for that theme:

Our goal this year isn't to bring in more of your money; our goal this year (and every year, actually) is to bring in more of you.

In the newsletter this week, I wrote to you about what it is that God wants from us. God doesn't want your money. God doesn't want your time. God doesn't want your talent. Not really. Not ultimately. What God does want is you! All of you. God wants every bit of the life and the individual that is you—your heart, your joy, your love. God has everything she could ever need, except for you.

And the church doesn't want your money, either. The church happens to need your money very much, but the church doesn't want your money. Your church wants you. We don't want names on some spreadsheet called pledgers.xlsx. Who cares? We want you. As the poet (James Russel Lowell) put it so well, "Not what we give, but what we share / For the gift without the giver is bare." The church needs our gifts, our time, our talent, our treasure, but without us, the people behind the gifts, what's the point?

You know how it feels when you're catching a 5:30 NJTransit out of Penn Station and you're running up at 5:28 and you run past car after car after car totally filled up with people and you feel like there's never going to be a spot for you? That's not the way your church should feel. However full the room is, however many members may fill the rolls, we want you to rest assured that you have a place in the heart of it all. And I hope this stewardship season may serve as an invitation to you. In a time of social disconnection, political polarization, and spiritual skepticism, and all the anxiety and worry that result from these things, God and your church are calling you into the heart of it all.

Important clarifying question: What does it mean to be in the heart of it all? On Friday we held an amazing funeral for our friend, Jim O'Brien. Jim was a wonderful person, which I've noticed tends to make a big difference in the quality of a funeral. But in addition to that Jim also made this church his home. The people here were his people, the work of the church was his work, the needs of the church community were his mission, his money was, in part, the church's money. Jim positioned himself at the center of the life of his church, and he created for himself a spiritual community that was capable of giving him a amazing send off. It's weird to call a funeral amazing, right? But it was! All of us and Jim did that together. It was so powerful that more than one person described the experience to me as "life changing." That's who we are as church. We're life changers! That's what we do for one another. That is amazing! Where else can join on to something like that? But to share with one another at such a deep level, to be able to give and receive gifts like that, requires us to step away from the walls and into the center of the dancefloor.

Now some of us like the margins. Some for a while, some forever. And that's fine. You do you. God bless ya! But I think there are many more people who are being held back from the heart of it all by the distraction, the globalized superficiality, the disconnection and nihilism and anxiety and worry of our times. And how does Jesus respond to our worries and anxieties? He tells us to stop it. Do not be

anxious. Don't keep worrying. Don't even worry about the most basic fundamental needs—food, clothing, shelter. Worrying about your needs distracts you from what is truly important—from giving yourself totally to God, from seeking a way into the heart of it all. End the distractions, turn off the loop of anxieties in your mind, and let God provide for you.

When we let God provide for us, a strange thing happens. I would not promise you that if there's a famine and you let God provide for you that you'll have a full belly every night. There's an old Persian parable about a saint walking through the woods who comes across a fox with no legs. "How does it eat?" the saint wonders. Just then a tiger approaches the fox, drops some meat in front of it, and the fox gobbles it all up. The saint realizes that God has shown him this scene for a reason! "God provides for the fox!" says the saint. "I'll let God do the same for me. I'll lie down here in the woods and fully trust in God to provide for my every need." So, the saint does this for many weeks until he's nothing but skin and bones praying for God to provide for him. And shivering on the cold ground he finally hears a voice from heaven say, "You who are on the path of error, open your heart to the truth! Stop imitating the fox and, instead, become like the tiger!"

If you let God provide for you, I can't guarantee you're never going to know need, but you will become the kind of person who shares whatever she can even when times are hard. This is the kind of risky faith that Jesus is asking us to engage in. And he promises us that it will, at least, be better than worrying, which is a useless painful exercise that keeps us from the heart of it all, that keeps us stuck in anxiety and grasping.

The truth that is hidden from us in our anxiety over our security is that we need the heart of it all more than we need a lot of money. What we really need is a few good friends, a community who will rally around us when we need them most, Jesus' teachings, the love of God, music, a space outside the home where we can be a family together, and opportunities to become generosity tigers who find God's providence in serving others. That's what we really need. And where we find all that is in the heart of it all.

"Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys." That's the heart of it all. And then Jesus says this," For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." And I think that last line is like a key to the lock of understanding what Jesus is saying.

This is how we want commitment to work: We want to do nothing more than dip our toe into the water and still manage to experience the full sensation of swimming in the ocean without getting wet or getting stung by a jellyfish or being cold or eaten by shark or any of the other things we worry might happen if we actually went swimming. Then after just dipping my toe in the water, if I have a really amazing experience doing that maybe next time I'll dip in a little more. But we all see the flaw in the

logic here. There's no comparison between ankle-deep wading and the thrill of swimming through the waves.

When it comes to the heart of it all, we make the same mistake. We think, I'll dip my toe in and if I have a spiritual awakening, then I'll get involved, then I'll give. But church is being involved, church is giving. Your commitment, your treasure, your self, is the key that unlocks the door to the heart of it all.

So, this is this the invitation: At a time when we've been scattered and discouraged and distracted—put your treasure in, put your time in, put your talent in, most of all put yourself in—into the heart of it all. This is where you're wanted. This is where you're needed. I can't promise you it will always be a smooth ride, but I can promise you that when your heart follows you your investments into this spiritual home, it will change your life for the better. And as you consider your pledge card over the next week, pledge to your church like someone who wants to be at the heart of it all.