



What Would Your Life Be Like?



A Sermon By
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Grace Episcopal Church
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An audio version of this sermon can be found on the Grace Church website at:
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/2016-10-16-AWW.mp3>.

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Leviticus 25:1-5, 8-12a, 13-19, 23

Luke 21:1-4

The Rev. Andrew W. Walter
Grace Episcopal Church
Stewardship Sunday
September 25, 2016

Jesus said, "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linens, and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate, lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table."

Luke 16:19-21

One year ago, on Stewardship Sunday, I was standing in the lobby after the 10:30 service, gathering up my things having greeted everyone, when a Mom appeared, with her small, five year old son clinging to her leg. I could tell the boy wanted to speak with me but, at that moment, was feeling a little bit shy so I looked at his Mom. "He just loves coming to Grace Church," she said, "being here every Sunday to learn about Jesus, and while we were sitting in the pew this morning, he wanted to give something back." And, handing me a folded up piece of paper, she said, "He wants you to have this."

Taking the paper from her hand, I knelt down toward the boy. "This is for me?" And, he nodded his head yes, still holding on to his Mom as tightly as he could.

"That's awesome! Thank you so much!" I said, raising up my hand for a high five, and the boy let go of his Mom for a minute to give my hand a slap.

With that, you could tell the boy was done. He did what he wanted to do and was ready to leave, so while he and his Mom headed downstairs, presumably to get a sugar-covered donut, I started walking back through the sanctuary, on my way to the Vesting Room to change.

Naturally, I wanted to see what the boy given me, so I unfolded the piece of paper, fully expecting to see a picture of Jesus, or another biblical character, but instead... it was this pledge form for our annual pledge campaign. I realize you cannot see it from where you are sitting, but the form is fully completed – in magenta crayon. There is a name, address, telephone number and email, none of which, unfortunately, are very legible. Where you write down the city in which you live, it does say, "weirdo" which, I hope, is not a specific reference. And then, right there at the top, on the very first line, where it says, "My gift is," the boy wrote in his pledge, clear as day: 1,000 million dollars.

This pledge form has been sitting on my dresser a year. I knew I wanted to share its story with you, not only because it was a cute story, but because what that Mom said was important and moving. Her son loves coming to church here and learning about Jesus, so he wanted to give

something back. She said he wanted to give something to me, but I know, deep down, that boy really wanted to give something to God, because it is God, working through this place, this community, who is touching that boy's life, helping to shape who he is and who he will become. Intuitively, the boy knew that, too, and so he wanted to give something back to God, something real, something tangible, for everything God had given to him.

I find that very powerful because that is the essence of stewardship.

Stewardship begins with appreciation, and it grows out of gratitude. God has blessed every one of us has been in many different ways, and it is important for us to say "thank you" to God, just as we say "thank you" to anyone else. We do that by giving back to God, taking some of what God has given us and putting it back to use for God's work in the world. We thank God by sharing our blessings, offering them to the service of others and the advancement of God's kingdom. At its heart, stewardship is an understanding that everything we are, everything we have, everything that surrounds us comes from God. God just lets us borrow it for a while.

This theology of stewardship is grounded in the Bible, where you can find it everywhere, in every single book, but particularly in the books of the Old Testament. The people of Israel truly understood that everything they were and everything they had came from God. They owed their very lives to God for it was God who led the people of Israel out of bondage in Egypt and into the land of promise. Their freedom, their land, their homes, their future – it was all because of God and the people of Israel knew it.

In our first lesson this morning, we read from the book of Leviticus, a book we don't get much in church on Sundays, and we heard about the origins of what is called a Jubilee year. For the people of Israel, a Jubilee was celebrated every fifty years. It was a time of joy, remission and pardon, when the mercies of God were particularly manifest. Debts would be forgiven. Prisoners would be freed. Families would return to their ancestral land. If you sold or rented your house, it would only be until the next Jubilee, when that property was returned to you. This was all a regular, ongoing part of the Israelites' life as a community.

For them, the Jubilee was a reminder of the abundant blessings of God. Since they were thankful for God's forgiveness, then they should forgive others. Since they appreciated the liberty that God provided, then they should liberate others. And, since the land on which they lived belonged to God and not them, then the land should not be sold forever. It was that simple.

The Jubilee was about stewardship.

Like the people of Israel, most of us are aware of the many ways in which God has blessed our lives. We look around at family and friends, other special people who have influenced us, our community, our church, the wonder and beauty of the world around us – the mountains, the beach, the ocean, the changing colors of the leaves in fall, we look around at all of this and know they come from God. We recognize them as gifts from God, and we are moved to give back, to love

these things and care for these things. We want to be good stewards of what God has given us and make our community and world a better place in which to live. We do...

But, one area where we struggle with being good stewards many of us struggle is money. We seem to have a different attitude about money than we do about other aspects of our life, like money is its own separate category, completely different from everything else.

As some of you know, our son James graduated from college about 18 months ago, and for the first year, he was working in Atlanta, making cold call. James would be the first to admit he was not very good at it, probably because he hated making those calls, and so over the summer, he took a teaching job in New York City. My wife and I spent Labor Day weekend moving him into his apartment, and we helped out financially by buying him a new mattress, a rug, and a bedside table. When we left the city at the end of the weekend, James still needed a few more things, so I told him he could use our credit card.

Then, last week, our credit card bill arrived, and there were some charges from New York City I wasn't expecting. I called James up and started running through the list of charges, hoping he would take responsibility and offer to pay for them, but James just found this process annoying. I would say, "Rosie O'Grady's Irish Pub."

And, James would respond, "My friends went out to dinner!"

This happened several times, until finally, I said, "Pal, I understand what the charges are. I just don't understand why they are on the credit card."

And, full of frustration, he shot back, "What did you want me to do? Use my own money?!"

That is often our attitude about money – it's MY money. I worked for it. I earned it. I need it. We hear today's Gospel story about the poor widow who put everything she had into the treasury, and we think she's crazy. Why would she do that?! We would never do that! Give away all our money. We need our money, for childcare, for college, for retirement, for... well, you can fill in the blank.

But, what if we took a different approach to money. Rather than thinking of it as my money, what if we thought about it as belonging to God? After all, everything we have comes from God, including our wisdom, our skills, our passions, everything that helped us earn that money. So, what if we thought of it as God's money? What would our life be like? Would we save differently? Spend differently? Have different financial priorities?

You probably think I am crazy for even asking those questions, as crazy as the widow in the Gospel story, but following the way of Jesus is crazy. Jesus said things like, "Love your enemies; forgive those who persecute you; blessed are the meek; blessed are the poor; the first shall be last and the last shall be first." That is some crazy stuff.

And, there is a reason Jesus spoke about money more than any other single subject – because he knew its power over us. So, what if it were God’s money? What would our life be like? What would your life be like?

Amen.