

The St. John's Pulpit

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SPIRITUAL RENEWAL EXPRESSED THROUGH FINANCIAL GIVING

Gospel of Mark 12:42-44

Season of Kingdomtide, November 13, 2016
The Rev. Dennis W. Foust, PhD, Senior Minister



Thank you for entrusting to me The St. John's Pulpit. This sacred desk was designed for the proclamation of God's message. My commitment to God and to you is to be an actively faithful steward of this pulpit and the role of offering messages that are more than 'my ideas.'

Pastoral preaching offers sermons consisting of both content and context. I admit some sermons reveal more content than others. Pastoral preaching is founded upon relationships; relationships with God, with people of the congregation and with place and time. When a pastoral preacher is faithful to being a pastor and a preacher, she or he is attentive to eternal truths revealing God's nature and mission and sensitive to the situations of people's lives.

So, today, I proclaim God's faithfulness, God's providence and God's promise in the context of a nation seeking to find its balance. Some of you are still reeling from a mean-spirited election season that has tested your stamina. Today, I proclaim God's eternal character and vision while also being sensitive to the week you have just encountered. Let me remind you that people who expect a political messiah are even disappointed with Jesus.

As a pastoral person, I invest a great deal of time paying attention. This week, I have listened to people who are afraid, sad, angry, confused, depressed and determined. I have encouraged people to be honest about their pain and grief; and proposed ways to invest their energies in healthy ways. Persons who have been victimized or abused are fragile every day. And, in times like these, we must be especially attentive to these fragile places in one another.

We know that every citizen who voted for any of the presidential candidates voted for an imperfect leader. We also know that God's message and Christ's Church have endured imperfect governments for millennia. No matter who lives in the White House today or tomorrow, we live into the vision of God as incarnated in Jesus.

In his autobiography, 'For the Living of These Days,' Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote, "...from my youth, my problem has been the endeavor to be both an intelligent modern (person) and a serious Christian" (p vii). Today, I remind you that you are Christ's Church in whom God is present and active; you are intelligent modern people and serious followers of Jesus. And, friends, that presents a problem for you. **What can you do, as followers of Jesus, to pursue spiritual maturity in a world focused on unspiritual immaturity?**

1. REMEMBER HOW GOD'S FAITHFULNESS HAS RESTORED YOUR SOUL.

This past week, I have meditated on times in my life when God's faithfulness has been the primary diet of my trust; moments when God has restored my soul. Some of you know that the car my mother was driving was struck by a train, during my junior year of high school. She barely survived. That accident changed her life – and mine. For several days, after her accident, we could not locate my father who was traveling in Israel. God is faithful. My 85 year old mother will be visiting with us next weekend and I am glad she will finally get to meet you.

Some of you know that our daughter, Rachael, who was married two months ago, is a surviving twin. Her twin sister, Emily, is buried in Louisville, KY. God is faithful.

Through the years, there have been numerous times when I or Paula and I or our family have learned what you have learned when you have walked through days, weeks, months or years looking into the future through fog; You can trust God's faithfulness. So, again, today, I am attentive to the eternal message of God's faithfulness and the hope God offers.

2. CONSIDER THE MAJESTY AND MAGNIFICENCE OF GOD.

One of my favorite stories is how, after late night conversations, Teddy Roosevelt and William Beebe would go out into the night and search the skies for a tiny patch of light near the constellation of Pegasus. Then they would recite together, "*That is the spiral galaxy of Andromeda. It is as large as our Milky Way. It is one of a hundred million or more galaxies. It consists of one hundred billion suns, each larger than our sun. Now we are small enough. Let's go to bed.*"

3. RENEW YOUR COMMITMENT TO GOD AS A FAITHFUL STEWARD.

Some people gathered in 1922 to begin a new church on this corner. In 1925, they broke ground to construct this building in which we gather today. They moved into this sanctuary 90 years ago, in 1926. Three years later, as they paid on that debt, the Great Economic Depression began and lasted for 10 years. The financial indebtedness of the church was a tremendous challenge. Yet, our St. John's ancestors trusted the living God who is faithful and gracious.

Our charter members and every generation since have held high the idea of stewardship. The fourth commitment in our church covenant reads: “*We will be faithful stewards, as God has prospered us, contributing our financial support for the Church and its ministries and offering ourselves for God's work in the world.*” Why is a commitment to stewardship important?

In our commitment to stewardship, we follow the early Church. As they developed their language of Christian faith, the word, *oikonomos* or ‘steward’ was included. This word described the top-ranking slave in a Greek or Roman household. The ‘steward’ was the primary household servant responsible for administering the Master’s possessions. Entrusted with the Master’s work, the steward managed finances, allocated resources and purchased provisions. **The steward did not take care of things belonging to steward – but things belonging to the Master.**

One of the important truths about our St. John’s Covenant is that the six commitments are not about wants; they are about needs. You need to worship; you need to learn; you need to have a community of others who bless you and call you to a better self; you need to be an actively faithful steward of God’s resources; you need to be a joyful witness; and you need to be a servant of God by serving other people. If you are not meeting each of these needs in yourself, you are an unhealthy person. When you focus on your wants, rather than on your needs, you become self-indulgent, self-reliant and self-centered. Many things you want can interfere with what you need.

This week, I have given a great deal of time thinking on the realities of God’s faithfulness and our need to be actively faithful stewards of the resources God entrusts to us. We cannot deny the reality that money is necessary to operate St. John’s and to offer ministry to the world. Jesus would have probably upset many Christians talking about money so much:

- 1- One third of Jesus’ parables speak about financial stewardship;
- 2- One sixth of all Jesus’ teachings are about financial stewardship; and
- 3- Jesus spoke five times more about financial stewardship than he spoke about prayer.

This morning, we read the story about Jesus affirming the generous widow. She gave out of her trust in the faithfulness of God. Jesus was inspired by her commitment. Imagine being a person who inspires Jesus; not by the amount of your gift, but by the humility of your trust. Our world will never be impacted by the spirit and teachings of Jesus if his followers only give what they can conveniently spare.

A few years ago, in Nairobi, Kenya, a boy brought to the school each day the soccer ball which was used at recess. He walked more than two miles each morning and each afternoon to and from school. Along his way, he picked up plastic bags and string and created the ball for the next day. When we visited, we threw into their recess two brand new soccer balls and all of the children ran to them with excitement. Then, I noticed the boy holding his plastic bag and string soccer ball. He was standing by himself – until two girls noticed him and walked over to him. Soon, the three of them were joined by the other children and the new shiny soccer balls brought by the strangers were forgotten. You see, they knew his humility and love for them.

This year, our Financial Stewardship Resource Team has chosen the theme, “*Sowing Seeds for Next Year’s Harvest.*” By sowing seeds of trust in God’s faithfulness, you renew your commitments to God as faithful stewards and servants in The Lord’s Harvest. God knows you are lured by the new things that are thrown onto the playground of your life. And, God knows that you know how faithful and generous God is to you.

Dr. Claude Upshaw Broach was the third senior minister of St. John’s, serving for thirty years, from 1944 to 1974. In his book of essays, ‘*Before It Slips My Mind,*’ he writes:

There are many agencies and institutions in society which have been created to serve noble ends, and they minister to the welfare of mankind – civic clubs, fraternal orders, social agencies, philanthropic societies, political action groups. We are better people because of them. Most of them were started by people whose dreams and motives were born and fashioned in the fellowship of the Christian church. And, if by some dark accident of fate, all of these agencies and institutions were swept away, the Church would build them back again.

But, if by some dark accident of fate the Church were to disappear and die, all of these others would languish and perish; no one would build them back. I believe in the Church – always under God’s judgment, but always the agent of God’s grace. And I have genuine pity for all of those who are strangers to the Church, this paradoxical mixture of glory and shame, defeat and victory. If God were not somehow in it, it would have been dead long ago.” (*Before It Slips My Mind*, p 61)

Friends of God, your financial commitments are not merely to support St. John’s annual budget during 2017. Your financial commitments strengthen the influence and ministry of God’s work through this church. Your financial commitments allow you to experience spiritual renewal through financial giving. The world needs us to deepen our trust in the faithfulness of God and renew ourselves to be faithful stewards of God’s mission which is theological and spiritually transformational; not merely sociological or political. Let us live as followers of Jesus Christ, guided by the message of God’s faithfulness! Amen and AMEN!