

1 Chronicles 29:10-18
Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16
Philippians 2:1-13
Matthew 21:23-32

A SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND ALISTAIR SO ON THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, SEPTEMBER 28, 2008 AT ALL HALLOWS CHURCH, SOUTH RIVER PARISH, IN DAVIDSONVILLE, MARYLAND

In God we trust. I really appreciate your presence here today. In fact, I am grateful that I gave each one of you a gift--- the coin you received at the door. Our presence as a Church today is a gift of the stewardship of our forbearers. Not too many of us can be where we are today without the sacrifice and stewardship of our parents, our grandparents, and greatgrandparents...

In the summer of 1994, I was getting ready to make the biggest move of my life. I was going to college in a different country. I was accepted as a freshman at American University in Washington, DC, over 8000 miles from Hong Kong. Even with the partial scholarship I received, my parents would still have to use half of their income in the next four years to support me through college. But it was a great opportunity. They wanted me to take full advantage of it. I was very excited and scared at the same time.

So on a hot summer day in August 1994, my parents saw me off at the airport. There, I saw my father cry for the first time, and the last time... It was ten years ago when he went to the LORD. I eventually became a biologist and when I heard God's call, I became a priest. It is lamentable that my father did not get to take part in any of my ordinations and celebrations. I do know that he is smiling down from heaven today.

My parents could have persuaded me to stay in Hong Kong and opt for a cheaper option for a university education. But they didn't. They knew that there was greater potential for me. And that potential would be better exercised in the United States. They knew that God had a different plan for me. So they toughed it out and sacrificed for my education, for my future, and for my life, as many of you do for your children.

The stewardship of parents for me was sacramental in nature. The motto "In God we trust" was embedded in their wholehearted support for their son. My father did not get to experience most of my accomplishments that he invested in, at least not in person. Yet, he never regretted a bit. His last words to me were about studying hard, building a good life, and trusting God. In the end, he truly realized that all things came from God, and out of God's bounty, we only gave back a small portion of God's blessings to us.

Many of our forbearers at All Hallows did not get to see and experience the joy and wonder of our parish today. They did not get to experience the outpouring of the Spirit on our Rally Sunday. They did not get to experience the joy and hard work of our youth at the car wash event. And they will not get to experience the beautiful sounds of our new pipe organ when installed. Yet, they have blessed and endowed us with their gifts so that we may have what we have today at All Hallows.

Our lesson from 1 Chronicles today echoes this same sentiment from the ancient of days. King David (ca 970 BC) is reflecting on God's infinite goodness and mercy on the people of Israel. In his theological reflection, he traces the source of abundance through the ancestors of Israel to its ultimate source: the God Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. He stresses in his epiphany that our every blessing, our every gift, our every breath, indeed comes from God alone. Whatever we do as an offering back to God is in fact an acknowledgment that we are only giving back a small portion of what God has already given us.

At that time, the people of Israel were preparing to build a Temple to honor and worship the LORD God Almighty. When we fast forward over a thousand years to the time of Jesus Christ our Savior, this great Temple would become the scene at which he would carry out much of his ministry: his discourse with the elders of Israel at the age of twelve, the challenge from the scribes in today's Gospel lesson, his overturning the table of the moneychangers who defile the sanctity of the place, and of course his comparing of the temple being destroyed and rebuilt in three days to his crucifixion and resurrection. Indeed, the building of the Temple is a prototype of the building of the Church for all nations in our time and space.

The essence of stewardship is a gift that keeps on giving, because in God we trust. We entrust our thanksgiving and free-will offering to God for the work of his Kingdom, which is a *world charged with the grandeur of God*, borrowing a line from Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem. Hopkins was a Jesuit priest and poet laureate of England over a hundred years ago. He used his deep faith and poetic finesse to inspire many. Robert Bridges, who became the poet laureate a decade later, however, was haunted by his own lack of faith often. So he wrote to Hopkins to ask for some spiritual advice that he might share more of the same faith. Hopkins only wrote back two words, "Give alms."

Embedded in these two words are some sublime theological truths. First, faith is a gift given to those who act in faith. When we pledge to God, we act in faith. Second, the advice to give alms, to give freely, abundantly, and joyously is to make a step in the direction of growing into an ever deepening and loving relationship with God. When we pledge, we express our gratitude to God. Third, in giving alms we learn that life with God is an exchange of gifts. The world, which is charged with the grandeur of God, is God's benevolent gift to each one of us. When we pledge, we allocate a portion of God's blessings to us back to that very world of which we are a part.

All Hallows 2009 Stewardship Campaign is an expression of that trust we have in God for all the blessings in our life. The slogan for this year is-- **Help us close the gap: give freely, abundantly, and joyously.** Thanks to our forbearers, we have been able to function and support many programs despite our small size. For a number of years, we have been drawing from the endowment fund to subsidize the difference between our pledge and rental income and the actual operating expenses. Sometimes, we used only the interest, but it was not always the case. It certainly isn't the case this year. We have used money from the principal of the endowment fund to subsidize our operating budget, as a result of the volatility in the financial market. This obviously cannot continue forever, or else our descendants will not have an endowment to speak of. Therefore, your Stewardship Commission has decided that we will aim to close the gap between our pledges and the operating budget. We may not be able to close the entire gap in one year. But we if trust God, and work hard together, we will be able to

finally close the gap in the coming years.

By God's grace, we have excellent leadership at All Hallows. We believe in leading by example. So trusting in God, and working hard together, the Wardens, Vestry, Deacon George and I myself have already turned in our pledges for 2009. We did so freely, abundantly and joyously. We all hope to help close the gap in the coming years, starting today. Even as we are closing the gap, our church continues to grow and expand.

Remember a few weeks ago on Rally Sunday with the Ministry Fair, Potluck Luncheon, and Ice Cream Social? Our facilities could barely handle all the people that day. And our Sunday School program attracted 40 children and youth alone that day. Do you want a thriving church like that every Sunday? I know I do. I know your Vestry does. So in order to capture this momentum and also meet the needs of our children, and youth and their teachers, we have begun the process of hiring a part-time Children and Youth Programs Coordinator. Your pledge to All Hallows for 2009 will not only sustain our programs and ministries for one more year. In fact, by your pledge, you will be saying yes to God, just like our forbearers have done, for perpetuity. Your pledge will plant the seeds for many more generations who will come after us at All Hallows.

I invite you to drop the coin you received today in the bowl at the narthex as you leave today. This will be a symbol of our pledge to God. We will give back to God a portion of what God has given us. And on December 7, we will bless the in-gathering of all the pledges together with this bowl of coins. Indeed, ***all things come of thee, O Lord; and of thine own have we given thee.***

In God we trust.

Amen.

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