

Easter IV (28 April 2024)

“EVERY good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.”

+In the Name...

Money, sex, and power! As I mentioned in a sermon recently, monks and nuns traditionally have taken vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience because money, sex, and power are besetting sins for much of mankind. Of course, none of those three are bad in and of themselves: we need money in our society if we want to have shelter, food, or clothing. We want the human race to continue to thrive on the planet, making procreation necessary to that end. And unless we want a pure democracy (who has time to run to the polls every time the county wants to raise the price of a dog license?), we need a ruling class. If you have been following the Anglican world for the last 30 years, you might be tempted to think we have an unhealthy obsession with gender

and sexuality, but today I am going to talk about money. For some people, that is a less comfortable topic to discuss than sex. For many years, the Episcopal Church enjoyed a reputation as the church of the wealthy. The joke is that is why the Doxology is sung at the end of the Offertory, so that rich Episcopalians could stand up and wave “good-bye” to their money. (For the record, we sang the Doxology every Sunday in the Methodist congregation where I grew up, and that Parkrose-area congregation was hardly a bastion of the rich and powerful.)

The fact is, most congregations approach giving exactly backwards: we say, “Here is the budget that your vestry approved, now you need to give us enough to cover the expenses.” Basically we are saying, “Give us money because the parish needs it.” While not untrue, this is not a very positive message. What’s more, the logical conclusion is that if we have more mega-churches we would not need to donate as much money to the church. I can think of two very famous congregations that are so heavily

endowed, they literally do not need to collect anything in the plate on Sundays to pay their bills. “Wouldn’t it be nice?” we are tempted to ask. Yes, but it would not change our need to give to God for the support of His Church even if we close up shop and all move to one of those congregations.

Giving is similar to praying, in that we do it because of how it affects us, not how it affects God. We do not pray because God *needs* to hear from us, but because our soul *needs* to be in communication with its Creator. Our soul has a *need* give back to God as a miniscule thank you for the precious gift of life and all the accoutrements that come with it. He gives us everything we have and asks for only 10% of it back. As a former Rector of this Parish was fond of saying, that is a much better deal than one gets from the IRS!

So back to the order in which we do things. The local congregation says we need “X” number of dollars to fund our ministries for the year. Then we go home and look at our

household budget. Let's pretend this apple is our budget. Every household has monthly expenses, so let's divide up our budget: we have to pay our 1. mortgage or rent. Then there are 2. taxes and insurance. 3. Clothing. 4. Food. The average household has 5. debt of some kind that requires a payment. Maybe there is 6. school tuition, 7. saving for a family vacation. Many households have a 8. car payment. Oh dear! Well, God, let me offer you the finest apple core this side of Baltimore! Seeds included!

It is tempting to think to ourselves, "I would like to tithe, but it is easier for people who have more money than I do. They have 'extra'." A couple of years ago there was an article in the *Wall Street Journal*. It was about elite private schools on the East Coast and how the number of parents requesting financial aid had skyrocketed. (Keep in mind, the article was about high schools, not colleges.) The writer interviewed someone from one of the school's financial aid departments. She commented on how the type of parent applying for aid had changed over the years. It used

to be one parent households or a family where one of the parents had a disability. Now she said that her school was receiving more and more requests from households with two good jobs. She explained the logic of the parents: Both Mom and Dad have good jobs, but after the house payment is made, two car payments, eating out, maybe a vacation home, college tuition, membership in a social club or two, there is very little “disposable income” left at the end of the month. The financial aid advisor saw the logic of such parents, but lamented that they were really not who these funds were established for. Our spending tends to expand to fit our budget, in the same way a disliked project can expand to fit the time allotted. A much more recent article asked readers how much more income a person would need in order to be “happy”. Regardless of job or income, the amount quoted was nearly always in the neighborhood of 50% higher than the responder’s current salary, leading one to conclude that a salary would never be high enough to afford tithing.

The question for us as Christians is do we have the faith to give God the first bite at the apple, so to speak...? There are several good reasons to tithe: First, it is in the Bible: we find it in Genesis when we are introduced to Melchizedek, the priest, and also we are instructed to do so by Malachi the prophet. Second, it gives us an opportunity to *live* our faith. We say we trust God with our lives, but do we really? Do we trust Him enough to help us live on only 98, 95, or even 90% of what we earn? “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also,” the Gospel tells us. Finally, there should be some sacrifice involved. No, you should not give so much to the Church that you are forced to live without life’s necessities, but how many Cadbury Crème eggs are really necessary?

So here are your marching orders for this week: everyone should receive a piece of mail from the Parish. If you have not yet completed a pledge card, one will be mailed to you with a letter from the vestry explaining the dedication of the 2024 pledge drive

and discussing some financial realities of the Parish. If you receive this mailing, please take time to pray about your commitment to God, and specifically your financial commitment to this Parish. If you have already returned a pledge card, thank you. You will receive an acknowledgment of that promise. If you signed your card in haste, please take some time this week to pray about the role of the Parish of St. Mark in your life.

St. Paul said in our epistle this morning that every good gift and every perfect gift comes from above. Whatever you consider to be your “perfect gift”, remember from Whom it came; and cultivate that generosity of spirit in yourself by striving to give back proportionately.

+In the Name...