

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Proper 25-B; 28 October 2018
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster
(rev. 201810250849)

Stewardship: Give First

In nomine...

I. Intro

I see on my calendar that the Ham & Oyster dinner is coming up. All anyone will tell me about is, “Oh, wait until you see it.” They seem to imply, “You’ve never seen anything like this.” Firmly ensconced in the identity and legend of St. Thomas’ are the countless hours, from early in the morning until late at night, that the people of St. Thomas’ have dedicated to making Ham & Oyster a success for the past 91 years. There is a sense of passion, purpose, and commitment that characterizes a whole lot of people involved with Ham & Oyster.

I see that same kind of passion all around St. Thomas’. I see it in the Tuesday night crew, which often blends into the Monday-through-Friday daytime crew. They care for aging infrastructure, some of it more than 170 years old, lovingly painting, repairing, cleaning, and renewing. I see it in the altar guild, coming in to set up and to clean up for each Eucharist, sometimes having to change the colors three times in as many days since that new guy scheduled a funeral (white) next to a Feast Day for an apostle (red) and immediately following a Sunday after Pentecost (green)!

I see passion in those who serve at Kitchen of Hope and IHN/Family Promise. People who give up a solid night’s sleep or an afternoon’s leisure, trading in their privilege to answer God’s call to serve others, providing food and shelter for those in need.

How many other groups and individuals are there laboring with passion, purpose, and commitment at St. Thomas’ through the weeks and months and years? Look around and see everyone represented here right now. That’s only a snapshot. I could stand here for an hour making a list for you. St. Thomas’ is just bursting with passion, purpose, and commitment.

II. Gospel

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus encounters someone who shares our passion for following him. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, and Jericho is the last stop before he gets there. As Jesus leaves Jericho for that final, fateful journey, a man cries out, “Jesus, son of David! Have mercy on me!” The crowd tries to discourage him, but he cries out all the louder: “Son of David! Have mercy on me!”. Jesus hears the man in his insistence, and summons him. The man throws off his cloak, goes to Jesus, and is healed of his blindness. Immediately, we read, he follows Jesus down the road to Jerusalem, the triumphal entry, and the Passion.

Bartimaeus is a type or example to St. Thomas’ in all sorts of ways. We could talk about the symbolism of blindness, or his insistence in calling out to God in prayer. But what I would like to reflect on for a moment this morning is how Bartimaeus threw off his cloak in his pursuit of Jesus.

Remember how a set of clothes is a treasure throughout the Bible. An extra set of a clothes was a rich gift to give to someone. Bartimaeus is blind, unable to work, and subsists on the charity of others. It is probable that his cloak is the most valuable thing he owns; maybe it is *all* he owns. That is his shelter in the cold of winter and his shade in the piercing Mediterranean sun. It’s what he sleeps in. And how, I ask you, is a blind person going to locate something he has just casually tossed away in the middle of a crowd? This is assuming no one else in that great city took it and ran off with it. As important as that cloak was to him, and as unlikely as he was to recover it once it was lost, Bartimaeus did not hesitate when he heard the call of Jesus. We read that he threw off his garment and approached Jesus, vulnerable and stripped of his own resources, ready to follow Jesus into a whole new life. Bartimaeus trusted that what lay ahead of him was better than what lay behind. The man had faith. Like St. Thomas’, he had passion, purpose, and commitment.

III. Stewardship: Giving First

Stewardship is all about having that same kind of faith that Bartimaeus had. We talked two weeks ago about 100% participation in the pledge campaign. This means you! We talked last week about proportional giving, and I offered an example of what that looks like in my own family's life. I challenged you, last week, to use the chart on the back of the pledge card, to bump up your pledge by 1% on your journey toward the tithe. This week my theme is giving first. Because that's what happens when you approach giving with the same passion, purpose, and commitment that Bartimaeus exhibited in approaching Jesus.

By giving first, I mean offering God from the first-fruits of your labors, not the left-overs. Not the spare change. We all have about a million reasons why we can't give, or not too much, not quite yet. Once I get the car paid off, or the kid through school, or this other bill taken care of, *then* I will be free to give to God. But the reality is that there's *always* another reason, another priority, another excuse. Our income is fixed, or it is too small or too irregular. But these are distractions. Giving, especially giving first, is something we *decide* to do. Giving first is a decision, a spiritual discipline, and a *habit*: giving first helps counteract the pressures of the world around us in order to form us into the people God created us to be.

What does giving first look like?

It means when you sit down to pay the bills, it's the first check you write.

It means when you set up your online banking to auto-pay your regular commitments, you set it up to send your contributions first.

If you don't have online banking, chances are your bank would *still* send a monthly Electronic Fund Transfer to the church for free if you just ask them. Bob or Harold or Tal have information about how to do that on a handy card: just ask!

Giving first means that my giving is not a discretionary, optional part of my monthly budget. It comes first.

IV. Conclusion

For 91 years, St. Thomas' has patted oysters, cooked hams, made pepper hash and potato salad, and baked pies and cakes. For 91 years we have invited our friends and neighbors to come onto our campus, to enjoy our hospitality, and to eat a hearty meal. We have demonstrated passion, purpose, and commitment. Nothing else will explain how or why we keep doing Ham & Oyster!

We *give first* out of exactly that same sense of passion, purpose and commitment. My invitation is this: throw off that cloak of worry, that cloak of anxiety. Throw off the cloak of greed and the cloak of mistrust. Like Bartimaeus, cry out to Jesus with all your heart, "Lord Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!" Hear his invitation to you and follow him on the way to that Holy City. With passion, purpose, and commitment, we can all pitch in to reach 100% participation in pledges, to give proportionally, and to give first. As we do these things we will find that, for St. Thomas' Episcopal Church, the best days are ahead.

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