

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Proper 22-A (Stewardship 2); 8 October 2023
St. Thomas', Glassboro – Todd Foster
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Stewardship: A Perspective on Church

In nomine...

I. Anxiety / Freedom / Appreciation

My son is home from college for the weekend, and he informed me he was going to trade motorcycles with a guy in Lancaster, PA. I got up to go with him yesterday morning and, after passing through a whole lot more rain than I had planned on, we met the guy, did the deal, and rode off. However, as we were about to ride off, Eli informed me that instead of coming home, he was just going to a nearby coffee shop to wait for his friends to come join him since they had plans together in that area that afternoon. As I thought about this, the main thing I felt was anxious.

Now I trust Eli. He smart, he's capable, he's responsible. He always tries to do the right thing. But as a parent, that doesn't stop me from worrying about him. He was on a new-to-him but not-so-new motorcycle: did it have a hidden problem we hadn't found yet? Would it make it back to Glassboro? From 100 miles away? How was he going to do driving this new vehicle? In the rain? In the dark when he and his buddies head for home?

Even in the best of times and the best of situations, most of us worry. It can be a habit. Anxiety is a part of all of our lives. Anxiety has all kinds of negative effects on our lives. It impairs our health and crushes our creativity. But one good thing it does, when I'm alert to it and responding as my best self, is it brings me to prayer.

For me, the prayer of faith is where I can bring things when they get too big for me. They're where I can say, "God: I can't do this!" Prayer is where I gain new perspective and remember that God is God and I am not. And Church is where I learn to pray.

II. Stewardship

This is our Stewardship season at St. Thomas'. This is a time to talk about giving, and today I want to talk specifically about giving to the church. And that conversation begins with the question, "Why Church?" Why is Church so important that it would be worth giving money for, in addition to time, attention, and effort? What is it about Church that gets you up on a Sunday morning, and brings you here instead of to the ballfield, the diner, or the couch with the Sunday paper? Most people make other choices than we do on Sunday mornings. And I'm not here to judge them. But I want to ask, What is it that *you* find in *Church* that makes it an important part of *your* life?

For me, there are lots of reasons why Church is important to me. But one of the most important right now is that faith, which the Church teaches me, is the place I can go to find consolation in the midst of anxiety. The Holy Spirit, prayer, Church, the Holy Scriptures: they offer me a new and bigger perspective that help show that my anxieties are not the world-eating monsters that they feel like. My anxieties still exist, they're still there for a reason, but in Church I gain a new perspective on them and their place in the order of things.

III. Scriptures – perspectives for freedom

The Scriptures are often a great resource in my search for perspective, peace and release from anxiety. Because God's purpose from the beginning has been the bringing of freedom to all people. The scriptures give perspective to our lives by reminding us of God's intentions. Today's lessons provide great examples of this reality.

In Exodus we hear the Ten Commandments, ten "rules of thumb for maintaining your freedom." Pro-tip: No matter how angry you are at someone, committing murder is not going to make your life better. The Ten Commandments offer freedom.

Similarly in the Epistle today, St. Paul acknowledges that, after he came to know Jesus Christ, all his religious training, credentials, and status became for him *skubala*: rubbish. Useless! Because what Jesus offered him was freedom and an unconditional embrace.

This week at clergy day Bishop Sally preached about our Gospel passage, about the parable of the tenants in the vineyard. She talked about how bonkers it was that the conspirators in this story really believed that if they killed the landlord's son, they would be granted the inheritance in his stead! As Jesus and his interlocutors both observed: this would not end well for those tenants. The road to freedom, that was not!

IV. Purpose of liturgy / church: enact reality

Last week, after the 10.30 service, a number of people came to me with their faces lit up saying, "Wow! What a great day to worship together!" They enjoyed seeing one another after the long summer. They enjoyed the opportunity to meet in the nave. They enjoyed the fantastic music, with our choir singing and an experienced accompanist playing.

When we gather as the Church, we gather to enact God's reality, that same liturgy that was the Word become flesh, Jesus Christ. James Farwell says that what we do when we celebrate liturgy together is to enact "the world as it truly is, or might be, or ought to be, or is coming to be."¹ We see the world from a new, truer perspective!

We escape imprisonment by our anxiety and all the demands placed upon us and the negativity that sometimes seems to be coming at us from an endless firehose of social media, the television, and even our families. In

¹ Jame Farwell, *Ritual Excellence: Best Practices for Leading and Planning Liturgy* (Seabury Books: 2023), 109.

liturgy we step away from those things, choosing not to use them to orient our world, but to remember that God is God, and it is God's world in which we live. The Church exists to call us back, again and again, to life in the Kingdom of God instead of all the lesser kingdoms in which we repeatedly find ourselves running around. In Church we learn to gossip the Gospel, the Good News that the Creator and Sovereign of the universe is our God, and that all the things about which we are anxious: they can safely be left in God's care, not ours. God can do something even and especially when we can't, making a way out of no way. God sets us free.

V. Giving for church / dream future / freedom

So as we gather for worship and we talk about stewardship, especially about giving to the Church, I want to ask you once again: Why are you here? Why does St. Thomas' matter to you? I come to find consolation in my anxiety, and to offer thanksgiving when I am given the grace to see God's goodness. Eli made it home last night safe and sound.

This is an exciting time of year, when we can dream together about what the future might hold for St. Thomas', what God might be planning to do among us.

One of the important functions of a Sabbatical, such as I took this summer, is to gain new perspective. This summer I visited different parishes every Sunday, looking for perspective to inform my work here at St. Thomas'. While visiting around, I noticed I was enjoying all the different musical styles of the different churches, and thinking about how much I love that St. Thomas' is a singing church, where music is important. I remembered how when I was interviewing with the search committee at St. Thomas', I talked about how beautiful liturgy is important to me, one of the things I wanted to nurture at St. Thomas'.

When I came back from sabbatical, one of the first things I did was to meet with the wardens. I told them I had been dreaming about the function of a Music Director for St. Thomas'. Someone to play both the Saturday night and Sunday main services. Someone to direct the choir from week to week and year to year. Someone who would be better at selecting the hymns than I am!

In the past we have been served by some generous volunteers at St. Thomas'. We've even hired some hard-working students. I am particularly enjoying working with Sean Baker: he has gotten to know us, to know how things work at St. Thomas', and he is able to blend in to the fabric of our liturgy so naturally you might forget he's there!

As I rested on my Sabbatical, thinking about why St. Thomas' is important to me and what it is I hope for this parish, I became convinced that it is time for St. Thomas' to hire a professional music director to help us walk forward into a thriving future. I began talking to some people about the idea of a Music Director; even among a dozen people, enthusiasm was sufficient to offer pledges for \$10,000, which is already half the amount we need!

A strong response to this pledge campaign, strong commitments to the continuing life of this parish, can make this happen. And I firmly believe that, once you experience what the worship of St. Thomas' is like with that addition, you are never going to want to go back.

This is the Stewardship season at St. Thomas': the time to dream about what St. Thomas' is going to be like next year and in the years to come. This is the time when we we meet God and together, by the power of the Holy Spirit, begin to determine what the future of St. Thomas' will be.

Whatever it is that brought you here today, I invite you to consider that reason, and its significance to you, as you pray about how you might wish to respond to the pledge cards being mailed out in the next week or so.

God has brought you and me, all of us, together in order to accomplish God's purposes among us. Chief among those purposes, Jesus told us, is freedom. Freedom from the anxieties and fatigue which bind us and make us sick. The freedom of living under a King who is not money, in a kingdom where there is no lack or want. Instead there is only abundance, full acceptance, and joy.

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