

**The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd**

Austin, Texas

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October 4, 2009

*Feast of Saint Francis, Matthew 11:25-30*

*All things come of Thee, O Lord, and of Thine own have we given Thee. Amen.*

Today we celebrate the Feast of Francis, a saint remembered in our own day primarily for his kindness toward “all creatures of our God and King.” We customarily commemorate this Feast with the Blessing of the Animals, a tradition we will continue on the parish lawn this evening at 6:30p (weather permitting), asking for God’s blessing to be with all of those with whom we make our lives, be they fishy, furry, or feathered. And that is good. Saint Francis’ life story, however, provides a more demanding model for us contemporary sojourners to consider how God calls us to be a grateful people, a generous people...a Christian people.

Raised in affluence, Francis’ father expected him to inherit and to prosper the family’s successful cloth business. His early life gave every indication that he would do as his father wished: he enjoyed the frivolity and vanities his family’s wealth provided him and, for the sake of personal glory, he (unsuccessfully) pursued military accolade. Then one day while on a leisurely ride, he came upon a leper, begging on the side of the road. And as God struck Paul on the road to Damascus, God struck at the heart of Francis. Some fundamental piece of Francis changed, and Grace flooded his spirit. He leapt from his horse, took the sick man into his arms, and kissed his leprous face.

Whereas before this moment all those material things into which Francis had been born and with which he had built his life had occupied his time and his attention, in an instant all his luxuries seemed to become nothing more than cardboard in the rain.

I know this experience only in small measure, when the higher thread count sheet did not change my outlook on life; when the newest, fastest computer did not suddenly turn me into a John Henry of electronic communication; that moment when, even as a child, I would get what I wanted and then, with a sinking shame, realize that I had not wanted *it* at all, much less had any need of it, much less could it benefit anyone other than myself.

While frequently the best I have been able to manage in response to the experience of a spiritual buyer’s remorse is checking the back of the receipt for my Next Big Thing’s return policy, in response to his new vision of the world, Francis gave up *all* his wealth, returned to his father *everything* that by inheritance was his own, and committed himself to a life of poverty. Still filled – overflowing – with that flooding Grace, Francis reordered his life and set his priorities for the Kingdom of God rather than the Kingdom of Francis.

In the caprice or providence of the Common of Saints, Francis provides us our first model of Stewardship as we begin our discernment – as a community – about how God calls us to give in the year of our Lord two thousand and ten. We set his model on our supper table, as we gather ‘round with our family or one of God’s creatures “bright and beautiful,” and consider how we will commit our time, talent, and treasure for the Kingdom of God. Francis challenges us as we hold before us our theme for this season: “*All things come of Thee, O Lord, and of Thine own have we given Thee.*”

That familiar refrain, spoken with our offering and presentation of the “fruit of the vine and the work of human hands” at God’s table for blessing, acknowledges what Saint Francis discovered, the leper in his arms, God’s Spirit

upholding them both: all that is and all that we are is a gift from God, called to the service of God's purposes and not our own.

We begin our Stewardship discernment with affirmations of what we believe to be true about our world, about the gifts we enjoy, and about the response God calls from us, and we begin with the conviction that all we have and all we are is of God. God made all that is, and all that we claim as "ours" is gift.

Moreover, having affirmed the source of our being, we recognize that every one of us has a gift to give. *You...have* a gift to give, an offering to make for the good of God's world and the coming of God's Kingdom. One fruit borne of our giving to God through the Church is the discovery of that value within ourselves: through our Stewardship, we come to recognize that you and I are made for the ministry of Jesus Christ and all of us have good and holy gifts to offer for that purpose.

Further, none of us has a gift greater than any other, for every faithful pledge has its own integrity. Whether we are blessed with great wealth and able to give grandly of our treasure, or whether we are blessed with time and talent that we can offer in abundance, given faithfully – *given faithfully* – no gift is greater than another.

I believe that Christian Stewardship begins within us, in the way it began for Francis. God did not knock Francis off his horse...God moved the man's very soul, cracked it open and filled it with thanksgiving; Francis leapt from his saddle because his heart first leapt within him. Our Christian Stewardship is not about turning on the lights. It can never be, or it will never be faithful. Our Christian Stewardship must be about that movement of the heart, our whole soul leaping in gratitude for the gifts that we have been given: and we...know...*many*.

In the sum of our generosity and in the sum of our gratitude, there is a practical implication to the movements of our hearts: bit by bit, day by day, piece by piece, we as a community make a difference in the Kingdom of God. In the sum of our Stewardship we can maintain this setting for our prayer; we can conjoin our praise with music that lifts our spirits; we can reach out into the world and serve the hurting and the hopeless; we can provide formation for our Children and Youth that raises them in the knowledge and love of the Lord; we can uphold one another when our hearts ache; we can be faithful, and we can do all of this and more. These are the practical implications of our shared Stewardship, and they are good. But they must – *they must* – follow and not precede that movement of the heart.

I propose to you that secular giving, works exactly in the reverse. I do not intend to belittle charitable giving, for it is critical to the welfare and betterment of our world in this time between now and the Kingdom's come. Secular giving, however, begins with a very practical purpose, and a very practical invitation. Fundraisers of community organizations study their needs and goals, and in order to meet those responsibilities, establish standards for their donations. These are the thermometer appeals, when the red line pushes donors' giving for the support of the symphony or the benefit of the football team. Our decisions about charitable contribution often find a comfortable compromise between what our bank account will allow, what our CPA counsels, and an agency's stated need. And, perhaps, in this exercise of thinking and moving outside of ourselves, even such practical decisions can potentially carry positive, spiritual implications: working with a group, sharing a common goal, all for the common good, can encourage principles we affirm as Christians, and, working from the outside, in, perhaps our hearts do move.

Even so, with our hearts *leading* us, we should recognize the first source of all we are, and give our first and our best to God and the Church. *With our hearts leading us, we should recognize the first source of all we are, and give our first and our best to God and the Church.* Now, I suspect the good people of Assisi would, over a glass of wine or a

loaf of bread, worry about the brokenness of the ol' parish church and its imperfections, even pointing out the foibles of its clergy. And certainly in our own day and in our own parish, we could do the same. However, as Francis believed that it was through the Church that God's Kingdom would be made known to a hurting world, so, too, should we be willing to trust that this well-meaning collection of sinners with whom we pray remains the very Body of Christ, God's instrument for our salvation and the salvation of the whole creation, and that when we give to the Church, we give to nothing less than God and the purposes of heaven.

As part of that trust, our membership must believe that our commitments to the Church will be received with dignity, and that in the sum of our generosity those resources will be tended faithfully and deployed in good conscience and in good measure. We must believe that just as we seek to be good stewards of our lives, so, too, our parish leadership seeks to be faithful with the sum of our gifts, minding them honorably and carefully. And I commit to you, that this is a promise you can trust. Entering my sixth month of ministry here, I have found that, without fail, the leadership of our parish appreciates their responsibilities and keeps their promises to be faithful stewards of the resources entrusted to their care.

An important part of our Stewardship effort this year and different from seasons passed, our Stewardship Committee will not set before you a financial goal toward which we will strive. Rather, we are simply encouraging every member of The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd to *participate*, making promises we believe will be good for our community and for God's Kingdom. Affirming again that our giving begins with our grateful hearts, the responsibility for your commitment must be your own, an intimate promise made between you and your God and not for the sake of any program or personnel.

Moreover, we trust you. We trust your timely response, and our parish-wide Stewardship season will conclude on All Saints Day, Sunday, November 1. On that day, everyone – Children, Youth, and Adults – will process their pledges to God's table where there will be two big baskets to receive our promises. For those who submit their pledge before that day, their card will be in a sealed envelope in the Narthex, so that you may bring it forward with your family and your parish family. There will also be pledge cards in the pews, allowing anyone who is in church to join that procession, even if the card they set in the basket states simply that they will carry the parish in their prayers during the hour of their attendance. After that day, there will be no beleaguering and belaboring calls from the chancel steps for more and more and more, for we are trusting your fidelity, trusting in your faithful pledge, and trusting that what pledges we receive will be enough. And I believe what we receive will be more than enough, an abundance as God's provision always is.

Sam Portaro, a priest of the Church who served for many years as the chaplain of Brent House, the Episcopal chapel on the campus of the University of Chicago, wrote a companion to *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, the calendar of saints commended to our remembrance on the days of the Church's liturgical year. Sam writes of Francis: "Francis represents an audacious and outrageous challenge; he preaches the gospel not in words, but in images too bold to dismiss and a life that was itself a parable. That is why we both revere and fear him. He speaks the truth by living the truth. In Francis, as in Jesus, the gospel was made flesh and dwelt among us, an incarnation impossible to ignore, so tangible and physical it compels a response. In a world increasingly material, it is the most powerful way—perhaps the only way—to communicate truth" (Portaro 177-178).

*In a world increasingly material, it is the most powerful way—perhaps the only way—to communicate truth.* That is, that we would embody our convictions, a people who, in the language of Job, "persist in our integrity," no matter what (Job 2:9). And if we claim, as we say in our prayers on Sunday, "*All things come of Thee, O Lord, and of Thine own have we given Thee,*" then we must be willing to set before us not only the challenge of Francis' prophetic life,

but the prophetic edge of our petitions. We must wrestle whether or not our lives and our actions reflect the convictions we claim and the prayers we pray.

Do we live in a way that witnesses what we believe is true about God and the gifts we enjoy? Do we give in a way that embodies gratitude for our many blessings? “In a world increasingly material,” how do our lives tell the story...or not?

These are difficult challenges to wrestle alone, and no one in this community need greet the leper on the path without the company of this parish family at your side. We enter the wilderness of our own hearts together, supported by the prayers of our Stewardship Committee, our larger Stewardship Team, our Vestry, our parish clergy, and, I hope, the prayers of one another. In this season as always, please consider your clergy resources as you discern how God calls you to give. These decisions should not come easily, but with deliberate thought, meaningful prayer, and honest reflection, and if you need someone to wrestle with you, know that our doors are open. Know, too, we may seek you out, as, together, we seek our fidelity as a community.

Your participation matters. Your part in ministry of this parish makes a difference, not only in the lives of these here gathered, but in the Kingdom of God. Your participation matters, your part makes a difference.

*All things come of Thee, O Lord, and of Thine own have we given Thee.* May these words and God’s Word strike at us, that we would live the prayers we pray.

Amen.