

Proper 20 – Stewardship James 3.16-4.6; Wisdom 1.16-2.22

The American industrialist, Henry Ford, was once asked to donate money for the construction of a new medical facility. The billionaire pledged to donate \$5,000. The next day in the newspaper, the headline read, "Henry Ford contributes \$50,000 to the local hospital." The irate Ford was on the phone immediately to complain to the fund-raiser that he had been misunderstood. The fund-raiser replied that they would print a retraction in the paper the following day to read, "Henry Ford reduces his donation by \$45,000." Realizing the poor publicity that would result, the industrialist agreed to the \$50,000 contribution in return for the following: That above the entrance to the hospital was to be carved the biblical inscription: "I came among you and you took me in."

We, like Henry Ford, have some understanding of our responsibility to give of our time, talent and treasure. Nevertheless, we often suffer from the coincident and creeping suspicion that we are being taken in, taken advantage of. We may give for many different reasons, but my guess is that one of the principal reasons that energize us is the

desire to do the right thing. Generosity is a universal virtue that should be encouraged. No one likes a greedy person. If I don't give I might be considered a greedy person. So we contribute to a cause either international in scope or a local cause, such as feeding a hungry beggar. And having done so we, like Ford, suspect that we have been taken in. So we are caught on the horns of a dilemma: would we prefer to feel stingy, or to feel as though someone has taken advantage of us. These horns are only sharpened when the appeal for charity goes out from the pulpit, for the preacher only serves to add a dollop of guilt or even divine retribution to the already unlikable cocktail of compulsion and imposition.

It reminds me of the story about the mother wanted to teach her daughter a moral lesson. She gave the little girl a quarter and a dollar for church "Put whichever one you want in the collection plate and keep the other for yourself," she told the girl. When they were coming out of church, the mother asked her daughter which amount she had given. "Well," said the little girl, "I was going to give the dollar, but just before the collection the man in the pulpit said that we should all be cheerful givers. I knew I'd be a lot more cheerful if I gave the quarter, so I did."

Commitment to the universal principal of cheerful giving doesn't make us cheerful givers. The feeling of cheer is a weak incentive that soon gives over to the much stronger one of self interest. And so we end up like the little girl, taking the preacher man at his word, and cheerfully putting the dollar back in our pockets.

But, dear Christians, I would propose to you this morning another reason to give of your time, talent and treasure. It is a better reason. It is a much stronger reason than commitment to a general and generous principal. Instead, I say that the foundation of all Christian charity and tithing is built firmly and completely upon an unwavering trust in the providence of Almighty God. It is when the Christian relies totally upon the great mercies and benefits that have been poured out upon him, and knows them truly to be the gift of his heavenly Father, that he may in turn open his heart and his hand in true charity.

Our Epistle lesson for the last three weeks has been taken from the Epistle of James. His letter to the Church is appropriate to my theme today. James wrote to a Church that was divided. In our lesson today he says, "What cause wars, and what causes fightings among you?"

The cause of the strife was money. It seems that in the Church there were Christians who were quite wealthy. Likewise, there were many in the Church who were desperately poor. The wealthier members of the Church were inviting their wealthy friends to Church and giving them the best seats in the house. The poor were encouraged to stand in the corner or sit on the floor. It seems that the wealthy had tried to defend themselves on the basis that they had faith in Jesus Christ and had thereby fulfilled their obligation. James replied to them that real faith has legs. He writes, "If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit?" They could not divide the body of Christ. They could not show partiality. They had been knit together in Christ's body with believers who starved and shivered. James says that they must not divide the Lord's body.

So James says in our lesson today, "What causes wars among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members? You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

Unfaithful creatures! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with god? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.” These are strong words! Perhaps they are too strong for us. Indeed, they may be like so much bitter medicine that we cannot bear to take a sip, even though the doctor has assured us of the cure! But let us press on, that we may be filled with God’s word. For James says that these folk are filled with desires, passions and covetousness. These people suffered from envy. That is, they were not content with what they had. Instead, they resented the success and property of their neighbors. They craved what they did not have instead of enjoying the abundance that they already possessed. They professed a love of God with their lips, but their stomachs bowed and worshipped the things of this world! And so, James says, they were enemies of God. They had replaced a desire for the Creator with a desire for the creature. They trusted in their own strength, the strength of their possessions, and trusted in their ability to get more of them. Here is the antithesis of benevolence, the far pole to charity. This is the empty state of the unwise man who is not the friend of God.

But the wise man places his trust in the providence of God. James gives us two examples of such wisdom: a nomad and a prostitute. For James writes, “The scripture was fulfilled which says,” Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness”; and he was called the friend of God. And in the same way was not also Rahab the harlot justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way?” See these two as God found them: Abraham in Ur and Rahab in Jericho. Both employed in their respective cities with no view to a call greater than survival in a dangerous world. But God made himself known to them and called them to himself. And Abraham pulled up stakes and traveled hundreds of miles with all his possessions to a land he had never seen. But more than this, among all his possessions he lacked the one thing he hoped for: a Son to inherit all Abraham’s household. Likewise, Rahab lived in a city destined for destruction. Yet she protected the Israelite spies, believing that their God would most certainly give her city into their hands. Each understood that ideas have consequences. Abraham and Rahab believed that God would provide for them and so they placed all their time, talent and treasure at his disposal.

My friends, here we have before us folly and wisdom. For those who will live their lives grasping after the things of this world will, with them, pass away. The bumper sticker, “The one who dies with the most toys, wins”, is patently false. For in the pursuing and getting of them your lives will be wasted in wars and destruction. But the wise man knows that he has received health and wealth from the Father who made him and bears him up from his first breath to his last. For Jesus said to his disciples, “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father’s will. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.” It was the will of the Father that the heavens and the earth were made. It was his will to make himself known to the Israelites as they struggled under the heel of the Egyptians. It was his will that his own Son be born of an Israelite mother, Mary, and that he should die and rise again from the grave. It was the Father’s will that he send the Holy Ghost to the end that every tongue and nation might hear and believe the message of Jesus’ saving kingship. All things have come from the Father and we are simply tenants of his gracious goodness.

We are tenants. We are stewards. It would be the height of folly to believe that we had created ourselves. No one would believe you if you said so. So why is it that we believe that everything that followed upon the date of our birth depended upon ourselves? Which of you can extend his life one day by your own might? This is equally foolish. We live and serve at God's pleasure. It is he that hath made us and not we ourselves. We are his people and the sheep of his pasture. It is he that has loved us and has blessed us so that we might in turn bless his name in this world and the next. It is folly to trust in that which is passing away! The grass withers, the flower fades, the moth destroys, the flesh fails. Why would you grasp on to these things? But the Lord and his word endure forever! So the wise man trusts in the providence of Almighty God.

Therefore, if all these things are the Lord's, and he has given them to us for our comfort and to his glory, it should be our joy to give for the spread of the Gospel. Hear me! It is not our duty; it is our joy to give to the work of the Church and the spreading of the Gospel. For God did not spare his own Son, but gave him as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. What gift have we to give in comparison to this one! There is none! And yet, the Father has called us into his Church that

we may share what we have that all men may come to the knowledge and love of Christ. How great is the providence of God! Truly, hope in God's care is the foundation for charity.

The great missionary to Africa, David Livingstone wrote, "I place no value on anything I have or may possess, except in relation to the kingdom of God. If anything will advance the interests of the kingdom, it shall be given away or kept, only as by giving or keeping it I shall most promote the glory of Him to whom I owe all my hopes in time or eternity."

Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise him all creatures here below. Praise him above ye heavenly host. Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. AMEN