

Christ Church Cranbrook
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan
Sermon for September 29, 2013 ~ Founders' Day
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

This year's stewardship emphasis is about one urgent and compelling challenge during this transition: The culture of giving here must be transformed from one that is dependent upon fund raising and endowment earnings to a culture that is grounded in stewardship. What's the difference?

Fund raising is episodic, need based, and transient - not a stable foundation to undergird a vibrant and fruitful church. Fund raising relies on proving the worthiness of a cause. Funds may be given or withheld according to the donor's agreement or disagreement with the purpose, the project, or the leadership. Fund raising is, in a sense, asking people to give from their surplus. While fund raising is frequently necessary to carry out special projects, it is not a reliable and sustainable way for a Christian community to provide for God's work.

In contrast, Christian stewardship is ongoing, asset based, and dependable. It is grounded in the belief that God is the Creator and Owner of the entire universe. It is grounded in the belief that human beings are created in the image of God, called to care for what God has provided, and gifted by God with unique abilities to fulfill that vocation. Our generosity toward God is unconditional in response to God's unconditional generosity toward us. Our generosity is in fulfillment of our purpose, to glorify God and represent God wherever we may be. The sacrifice of Christ on the Cross is our example of the quality and the extent of God's generosity. Sacrificial giving on our part is never from our leftovers. Faithful stewardship is not dependent upon whether you like the priest, the music, or the actions of the vestry. However important those things might be, in the Church, Christian stewardship is about giving to God, not about making a political statement.

When fund raising is confused with stewardship, too much emphasis is placed on the money and not enough on the mission, money is hoarded instead of invested in the kingdom, people become anxious about having enough instead of recognizing the bountiful resources God has provided, and we are concerned about scarcity instead of fostering a theology of abundance. When fund raising is substituted for faithful stewardship, the primary instrument of the gospel becomes less fruitful.

The primary instrument of the kingdom is the Church. God places us in the covenant community where the Holy Spirit prompts us to faithfulness alongside others, where we are nourished in Word and Sacrament, and from which we are sent out to participate in God's continuing work of redeeming the creation.

In today's reading from Exodus, we see how excited our ancestors in the faith were at the opportunity to work together to build a tabernacle for God in the wilderness. Those whose hearts were inspired and willing brought the best of everything. Their joyful spirit must have been like the spirit of the Founders of Christ Church Cranbrook when they envisioned and built this edifice. Look around you. This edifice is a sermon in stone, wood, fiber, metal, and every form of artistic expression. But the building and its furnishings are not an end in themselves; they are a testimony to the abundance of God's blessings. The Founders gave it for the glory of God and for the work of God's people. They wanted these facilities to inspire the hearts of worshippers to align their wills with God's will. They hoped a church that did not have to struggle with the burden of raising or borrowing funds to build a building could instead focus with glad and generous hearts on the mission field at its doorstep. They wanted their legacy of beauty and generosity to motivate others to "extend, to widen, and to improve" what they had begun.

Somewhere along the way, the parish became too dependent upon the stewardship of the Founders and others who have gone before. Because of the prevailing culture of fund raising, many people came to think the church did not need their contributions and lost touch with the call to exercise faithful stewardship. And so

today we find ourselves in a strange situation. We live in the fourth wealthiest county in the United States and yet the data on the chart in your bulletin suggests a very different story. It is a story about a spiritual condition that needs to be transformed for the sake of Christ's Church. The endowment does not relieve us of our personal responsibility for faithful stewardship over what has been entrusted to us. Have you ever considered that the money in your bank account and in your pocket has sacramental potential? Can it be an outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual grace of God at work in your life?

That chart shows you that the average pledge at Christ Church Cranbrook is 25% below the national average pledge in The Episcopal Church. But when I consider who you are and where you live and where you worship in this glorious house of worship, I would fail you if all I did were to suggest that you try to give at that level and become "average." Nothing about you is average! St. Paul's challenge is as fresh for this parish today as it was 2,000 years ago when he wrote these words to the Church in Corinth, "Now as you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you – so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking."

Allow me to set a vision before you: It is the vision that you will be inspired to excellence in generosity. It is the vision that you will discover what happens for you and your church when you advance one or more steps on the staircase of generosity. It is the vision that you will be inspired to surrender your wills to God and cause the ecclesiastical equivalent of a tipping point in the history of this parish. It is the vision that you will be so transformed in *your* generosity that the generous legacy of those who have gone before us, will no longer be needed for sustaining the day to day mission of this community of faith and instead be invested in ways that go beyond mere maintenance, allowing the biggest Episcopal Church in the state to recover its destiny as the *leading* Episcopal Church. In January at the Annual Parish Meeting, we will focus on establishing a new legacy stewardship program and in February we will focus on the stewardship of our time and talents. But now, today, we must concentrate our attention on the transformation of the basic culture of giving in this parish.

I've been told that it will take a miracle for that to happen and for you as a community of faith to overcome dependency on fund raising and endowment earnings. (By the way, I was also told that it would take a miracle to get 200 reservations for brunch today. Almost 400 have told us they'll be here!)

When I think about the miracle of this community of faith joining hands and taking the next step toward becoming a truly generous people, I think of the most famous of all the miracles of Jesus. The Feeding of the 5,000 is the only miracle recorded in all four canonical gospels. All those people gathered to receive the ministry of Jesus became hungry. Rather than send them away, Jesus told his disciples to feed them. Their response was the sort of thing that often prevents miracles from happening. They succumbed to their sense of scarcity. "Where will we get the money to buy food for all these people?" So, Jesus told them to bring him what they could find. One little boy offered his five barley loaves and two tiny fish. Jesus blessed it and told the disciples to distribute it. After everyone was satisfied, they filled 12 baskets with leftovers. Hunger was transformed into food – more than enough to feed everyone. What a miracle!

Now, some people think all miracles must be supernatural. Others of us think at least some miracles are supernormal. I believe this miracle was supernormal. By that, I mean that under the influence of Jesus Christ, the hearts of those gathered were put right, made normal, brought into alignment with the heart of God, so that they gladly shared what they had with one another in one spontaneous outburst of generosity. When they feasted on the Bread of Life, they selflessly shared the bread in their pockets.

That's what I pray will happen here today and in the weeks ahead. The person who told me it would take a miracle may have been right. (But it may not really be much of a miracle, when you consider the resources

available to the people of this church.) And I came here today expecting a miracle – not a supernatural one, but a supernormal one in which hearts are inspired and wills are transformed by the Holy Spirit in one, extravagant, spontaneous, outburst of generosity inaugurating a new and lasting culture of giving that is rooted and grounded in gratitude for God’s abundant goodness and anchored with confidence in the excellent work God has in store for Christ Church Cranbrook.

On Friday, about 20 members of Christ Church Cranbrook gathered on the renovated playground at Detroit’s Glazer Academy. Class by class, the children of the school came before us. Each child was given the opportunity and the means to express gratitude for what has been freely given to them. The cards, posters, and banners are on display in the Hospitality Center. This morning, we will be placing in your hands a pledge card. That card is to provide each and every member of this community of faith with a fresh opportunity to generously express gratitude to God. The children at Glazer expressed their gratitude before an audience of 20. Today, you and I are here to express our gratitude before an audience of One – God, the Creator and Sovereign of the Universe, the Giver of every good and perfect gift.