

A SERMON FROM ST STEPHEN'S

# COMPAGNONS DE VOYAGE

A sermon preached 11th September 2016, Stewardship Sunday, at St Stephen's Episcopal Church, Belvedere, CA, by the Rev'd Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr. Based on the Collect, or Prayer, of the Day.

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O God, because without you we are not able to please you, mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen

**I**tell you a secret. People are never more sanctimonious than when they think they know better how to spend someone else's money. Perhaps that is why, in more than a few churches, when the rector says 'stewardship' some people start edging toward the door.

But you're not that type. Victoria and I are still moving into the rectory, but I think I've already sized you up enough to say that you're grown ups about money or you wouldn't be here. You can be trusted with money or God wouldn't have given you so much of it. You know something that the merely naïve or resentful haven't been in a position to learn: that we aren't given money for our own ego or affluence. You know, deep down, that the greatest pleasure you have ever had with money has involved giving it away. And so today, on Stewardship Sunday, I want to propose that we adopt as our 2017 Stewardship Campaign theme: *THIS IS SO MUCH FUN!*

In a parish I once served, I was at my first stewardship committee meeting where themes were considered for the upcoming campaign. With a straight face, I proposed this one: *Either life is holy with meaning or life doesn't mean a damn thing. You pay your money and you take your choice.*

It was a little wordy. We ended up that year with *Charting Our Future Together in Christ*. That lacks punch, but it isn't bad. Stewardship asks where we are going and how we plan to get there if we get there at all, and what we are going to find if we finally do. Vestries are responsible for that planning. So ask yourself, What will I do — what will my credit card do — to support the life and mission of St Stephen's Church? God put us together in such a way that being generous releases endorphins, and as Elle Woods of the movie *\*Legally Blonde\** put it, endorphins make you happy.

We pay our money every day to one thing or another. By the way we use what we earn and what we're given we

prove what matters to us. If you're a member of St Stephen's you have received in your mail an envelope with a pledge card in it. Hmm. You'll ask: What to do with this? What number to scratch there? How much of what I work so blessedly hard for should I give gladly away? If you believe in what we say and do at St Stephen's — if you believe that God is busy in your life here — then when the pledge card comes I ask you to do this: say a prayer, take your pen, and surprise yourself.

**T**he struggle we have with money is really with Jesus himself. And the truth about Jesus is that if indeed he is everybody's friend the way the old Jesus hymns proclaim, he is at the same time everybody's worst enemy. He is the enemy at least of everything in us that keeps us from giving him what he is really after. And what he is really after is our heart's blood, our treasure, our selves. He wants to make us living members of his own Body.

So herewith a story about Evan and Gabriel who many of you met on my first Sunday as your new rector. On the twenty-third of June, 1993, Victoria, Evan, Gabriel, Gillian and I took a train from Seekonk, Massachusetts to Boston to visit the New England Aquarium. I remember the sea lions as we call them (it would be interesting to know what they call us) racing around in their tank, leaping through hoops, balancing beach balls on their whiskered snouts and delighting us all.

On the train ride home that evening, Gabriel and Evan were sitting in front of me and Victoria on opposite sides of the aisle. As we came to one stop, I looked up and noticed that Gabriel was patting people on the arm as they passed by him. Victoria saw it, too. Sitting behind the little Archangel, she leaned forward and whispered to him, "Gabriel. What are you doing?" "I'm petting them,

mum,” he said. “What?” she whispered. You shouldn’t do that, Gabriel.” “I’m only petting them, mum.”

At the next stop, I overheard Evan encourage Gabriel to pet a steward whom Gabriel apparently mistook for the conductor. Gabriel said, “No.” “Why not?” Evan wanted to know. “Because I don’t pet abductors [sic].”

**T**here’s a steward in this story but that’s not why I tell it. I tell it because I ask you: Why would a boy barely four pat on the arm people he did not know from Adam? It was a crazy thing to do. It was a risky thing to do. It ran counter to all standards of New England practicality and prudence.

Gabriel did it because he was *debonair*. He did it because he saw the people on that train not as strangers but as *compagnons de voyage*. It was not a level-headed, play-your-cards-close-to-the-vest kind of thing to do, even as giving away your hard-earned cash is not level-headed, not playing your cards close to the vest. But to live this way makes visible who we are and where we are going. It is to see the world the way Jesus’ disciples saw it seeing him: lit up as if by lightning on a dark night.

I began with a kind of secret. I want to end with another one, something not secret but private. I want to do so because today is the fifteenth anniversary of 9/11.

When we say the Our Father, the Lord’s Prayer, which we say at every Eucharist, whilst you’re saying the doxology which came to become the closing line of that prayer, “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the

glory, forever and ever,” I’m saying another prayer, one focused on what’s happening at that point in the liturgy, the breaking of the Body of Christ or what’s called ‘the Fraction’.

**I**t’s a prayer not meant to be overheard by you but lodged quietly into God’s ear. If this seems odd, bear in mind that the doxology which is being said was added on later. It wasn’t part of the original prayer.

So I say one of several ‘private prayers’ that priests, especially those of Anglo-Catholic churchmanship, insert discreetly into the liturgy at various points. This prayer is called ‘the embolism’. As you go out from St Stephen’s today stewards of all God gives you, money and nothing less than the body and blood of Jesus, I want you to take this prayer as your own:

Deliver us, we beseech Thee, O Lord, from all evils, past, present, and to come, and at the intercession of the ever-blessed and glorious Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, the holy Apostles, Peter and Paul, Andrew, blessed Stephen and all the saints, vouchsafe to grant peace safely in our time; that we, being holpen by the succour of thy mercy, may be delivered from all disquietude of heart; through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.