

Diamonds and Gold

Rob Gieselmann, Pent. 18C, Sept. 8, 2013

Today might be summed-up in a quote by Jean-Paul Sartre, “*We are our choices.*”

Now, each of us has received some measure of grace, some measure of an extra *something* we don't deserve. But, once you discount the grace, what we are left with is the sum of our choices.

Take Agnes Bojaxhiu, for example. Early in her life, Agnes decided to donate herself completely to Christ, following Jesus' words to the letter. She became a nun, *hating her own family* in favor of the human family; *abandoning* her property, to make others rich.

Agnes particularly felt drawn to the suffering of Christ, and by extension, to human suffering.

She embraced the poor, the poorest of the poor, serving each person as though he were Christ himself.

You might think that a person like Agnes would enjoy a flourishing spiritual life – that she would feel some extraordinary connection to God. She didn't, or certainly not all of the time. Instead, Agnes wrote of estrangement, and deep feelings of abandonment. Yet even in the darkness, even in midst of doubt, she worked tirelessly, literally embracing the poor in her arms, completely setting herself aside.

Most of you by now recognize this description as Mother Theresa. Agnes was her given name.

And if Mother Theresa doesn't represent Jesus' intractable words, I don't know who does. Hate your family. Carry your cross. Sell your possessions.

Someone told me the other day that one of the popes gave Mother Theresa a Cadillac. Imagine the irony – the pope giving a saint a Cadillac, and of-course she donated it to help yet more people.

Mother Theresa possessed absolutely nothing in life, save a soul constructed of diamonds *and gold*.

In 2008, an Australian named Ian Usher decided he wanted a new life. So, he listed his old life for sale on E-bay. This is true. The successful bidder received not only Ian's house and furniture, but his jet ski, motorcycle, parachuting gear, plus his friends and even his job.

Yes, Ian's job. The buyer received a 2-week trial at Ian's old job, convertible to a permanent job, if performed well.

Upon close of the deal, Usher promised to take the first plane out of Perth, regardless of destination, to start his new life.

Indeed. Usher's life sold for \$384,000.

Now, Jesus said, “Give up your possessions,” and I have to ask, “Is this what he meant?”

By the way, what were Jesus' possessions? Surely he had a staff, or a tunic or perhaps a purse with a coin or two in it? Had Jesus lived in today's world, his disciples could have sold Jesus' staff on E-bay. I'm sure it would have rivaled Ian Usher's \$384,000 sale, or Brittney Spears' used chewing gum, that someone listed for \$14,000.

Give up your possessions, and hate your family. Like Jesus, and Mother Theresa, and Ian Usher.

But the possessions themselves – what you possess, the things you own – are a red herring issue. Rabbit trails, taking you in the wrong direction.

It isn't about possessions, or lack thereof. It is about the life you live, and in the end, despite her poverty – physical and even spiritual – Mother Theresa left behind the heritage of grace. Despite her diminutive stature, she stood so tall.

You may have noticed this phrase around St. Stephen's lately. It is on your bulletins:

St. Stephen's Episcopal Church: Growing Ministry, Community and Impact.

Think about these words.

In my opinion, the key word is *Impact*.

Does St. Stephen's – by extension, do you and I – make a real difference in lives? Are we healing souls, and creating a better community?

My first bishop, Bob Tharp, used to say, "There are two types of churches, the church that focuses inwardly, and exists only for itself, and the church that focuses outwardly, existing beyond itself."

"It is the church that focuses outwardly that thrives."

That church is full of people who donate themselves.

Indeed, St. Stephen's makes a real difference to real people. Growing Ministry, Community and Impact.

And while impact may be the operative word, I'm not altogether fond of the word, *ministry*.

"Ministry" is an insider's word, a church word. Nobody but us really knows what it means, and I'm not too sure we know.

So when we first talked about using the word, I looked for a suitable synonym, but there isn't one. The word, "*program*," falls short because "program" does not convey the spiritual nature of what we do here. A program doesn't impact the soul – whereas a ministry does.

But the word "*ministry*" is just so church-y.

I even looked it up. It comes from the Latin, *minus*, meaning the least. As in the servant – or to serve.

Think Mother Theresa, here, becoming the least so others might be promoted.

Or think Onesimus, in Paul's letter to Philemon. Onesimus was Philemon's slave. He ran away and joined Paul and his troupe, but this created problems for Paul. Philemon was his friend. Paul couldn't protect Onesimus without being duplicitous to Philemon.

Paul was caught in the middle.

He resolved his dilemma by sending Onesimus back to Philemon, which is what this letter is about. In this letter, Paul pleads with Philemon not to punish Onesimus, as he has the legal right to do, writing instead that Onesimus – a name which literally means *useful*, has - and this is a play on words – "*become useful to me.*"

Onesimus, you see, is now a *minister*. One who gives himself away. Not as a slave, but voluntarily.

Jesus, and Mother Theresa, and Ian Usher and Onesimus.

Today is *Ministry Sunday*. And thinking back about your own life and the ways in which you give yourself away, and that you are, as Sartre said, the sum of your choices, what choices have you made?

What church-choices have you made?

What is the impact of your religious life on both yourself and others?

Sometimes, a person will complain to me that God doesn't seem to notice him or her, but too often these are the same people who have done nothing to invite God into their lives. The sum of choices.

Ministry is about your good choices. And ultimately – the life you will lead.

So I ask, What ministry will you engage, or *will engage you*, this coming year?

I tell each newcomer class I teach that there are three expectations of parishioners at St. Stephen's:

1. attend church
2. contribute financially
3. find something – at least one extracurricular activity – to involve yourself in.

And I would say the same to you. Find your ministry. Give yourself away. In the process – you might just find yours to be a life of gold and diamonds.

For you, too, are the sum of your choices.
