

Stewardship of Gratitude

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1. The 60's and 70's were a fertile time for Christian faith. In 1962, Vatican II had cracked Christian thought wide-open, but something else actually propelled actual faith –

It was - **chaos** –

Chaos – the **civil rights** movement, the **Vietnam War** and the **fear of communism**, the **sexual** revolution, **political corruption**, **drugs** and an emerging chaotic style of music – rock-n-roll – and then there was Woodstock.

People viscerally felt the crack in society's foundation, and wondered, *how will all this end?*

Mainline Christian denominations participated, not in a way to resolve chaos, but to foment it – speaking for civil rights and against the Vietnam War – a heritage we can be proud of – and yet, the church did very little to *facilitate actual faith in the lives of people who **lived** the chaos ...*

This is how the **Jesus Movement** arise – and facilitated *faith*:

People got saved, **born again**, experienced **Jesus** - not as the unattainable **Christ** - but as **Jesus the person**, first hand –

It was during these years that I discovered the meaning of *personal salvation*.

Reflecting all of society, my world was chaotic.

My **dad drank too much** – way too much, and our family system – and this is the rule in an alcoholic family system - was chaotic. **Up was down, and down was up** –

I was fourteen, at the time, and like most fourteen year olds, I wanted to be simultaneously *invisible and noticed* – to be noticed for who I really was, and valued -

Which, I suspect, is exactly what most adults want at some *very deep level*, to be **seen**, **not** for who you pretend to be, but **who you really are**, and accepted.

And for me, along came this **very personal God** – the same God you and I are worshiping this morning – and ...

for the first time in my life, I felt simultaneously **vulnerable and completely safe**.

Indeed, the very reason I do what I do to this day is because I want you to learn this about God in relationship with you: by becoming vulnerable you experience complete acceptance.

My story is the same story as the Samaritan man who had leprosy. Jesus *saw him, and accepted him*.

2. **A leper** - was the scourge of society, actually rejected –

he was required by law to yell out ahead of himself as he walked, **leper, leper**, so people would have time to run away from him –

but Jesus, when he heard this man and the others yell, **leper, leper**, looked-up to see –

Scripture says that: Jesus saw them.

And you see, this story is all about seeing –
Jesus **saw** them, and then told them
to go **show themselves** to the authorities,

but only this one man, and not the others
saw he was healed –

And all this seeing, reminds me of the movie Avatar, and do you remember the Na'vi – and their method of intimacy – they looked into one another's eyes, and said, **I see you**,

and Jesus saw these men **that way** – *the way someone sees into the soul of another, and accepts them* –

In fact, Scripture doesn't actually call them **lepers**, but **men with leprosy**.

Jesus saw men with leprosy. And one writer described it this way: Jesus

saw wives without husbands, homes without fathers, [he saw] important work that was not being done. He saw men whose dreams had crumbled [inside] as their bodies crumbled on the outside. He saw helplessness and [] despair.

That is why he healed them, all ten,
but only this **one leper** – one in ten – gave thanks.

Spiritual gratitude is a rare commodity. Have you ever noticed during our Sunday prayers how quiet it gets when it is time to offer thanks to God? People don't know what to say ...

And yet, each of us **has received** grace upon grace – so much of life – breath itself – is gift,
but if gratitude, deep spiritual gratitude, is a gift, it is a gift with which God seems to be stingy.

Which, in my mind, makes this prayer in our Eucharistic prayers **all the more important**:

Open Our Eyes, O Lord, to see your hand at work in the world about us.

3. This is **stewardship season**, and I have to ask,

When you think of St. Stephen's, what comes to mind?

*The healing **you** have received here?
The chaos resolved in your life, or that you hope to be resolved?*

*Do you see a place where others make some extraordinary connection?
Where faith comes alive in the midst of **chaos**?*

What do you see? A huge concrete building with a high ceiling? Or is there more?

I love these testimonials that have been popping up – like mine – the one I just told you about the grace of God in my life, these testimonials reflect the grace of God in the lives of those all around us –

Open our eyes to your hand at work in those around us.

These testimonials reveal the transformation of austere concrete building into a living and breathing faith.

Grace is rampant here, filling life and soul and heart and being ...

4. **I know this year's stewardship letter was – how shall I put it: direct?** Perhaps a little too direct?

You didn't see it coming. After displaying such generosity during the capital campaign, *you didn't expect to be asked to increase your annual pledge, or at least not by so much.*

Neither did I, Nor did your vestry.

In fact, your church is on a better financial footing than we've been in years – debt will be paid off as capital pledges are paid, and overall annual pledging is strong.

But it is this simple:

This past year, several significant members died, leaving a pledge gap of between \$35-50,000.

The choice is simple: *either we fill the gap or cut expenses:* and the only way to cut expenses is to cut staff.

That is why your vestry is asking so much of you.

But – and we're all adults, here – the email or letter you received is no more than an invitation to help. Nobody presumes you can or should do what is being asked.

There is no arm-twisting, here –

If you received an invitation to pledge a specific amount – not everybody did – approach it this way:

If the church asked you for too much, I hope you feel flattered.
If the church asked you for too little, I hope you'll pledge more
than asked!

As far as I am concerned,
the only standard of giving
for any Christian is that high
plain of spirituality: **gratitude.**

You simply give because you, like
the Samaritan man with leprosy,
have received so much,
and you are simply **returning thanks.**

Kind Lord Jesus and holy Lord God, visit us with gratitude, open our eyes to see your hand at work in the world about us. Visit us with the kind of mercy that enables us to reach out to others –

In Christ's name,

Amen.