

Giving Because Of Our Proclamation

In 1992, I graduated from Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia. Upon graduation, I was ordained Deacon and six months later Rector of Emmanuel Episcopal Church. Emmanuel is located in Farmville, N.C., which is about 15 miles northwest of Greenville, N.C. The church is located in the eastern diocese, is small and very much a pastoral size congregation.

Shortly after settling into my new position, the vestry learned the church possessed **half-ownership** of a building that was located across the street. The building was gifted to the church from a parishioner who died before my arrival. While the vestry was grateful for the gift, they did not know what to do with the building. In fact, some looked at the gifted building as a burden. Church leaders wished they owned the building out-right, rather than being a partial owner. The other owner was not a parishioner and did not want to sell the building. He was hoping the town would revitalize itself in the future and the building could one day be used for income. All people involved knew that much guidance and clarity from God was needed from God to figure out how to use this building for ministry.

Through prayer and awareness, a few church leaders slowly came to realize Farmville for a small town, had a large number of poor, hungry and needy people in the community. Others resisted this thought and did not want to acknowledge this population existed in the town. After all, Farmville took pride in having the most millionaires per capita in the state of North Carolina. Most of the needy had worked in the farming and tobacco industry for a long time. They picked tobacco, corn and pulled many a potato out of the field. But as they had progressed in years, their bodies would not allow them to perform the difficult manual labor that was required. And no other jobs existed for them to perform.

After much discussion, the vestry decided to turn the gifted building into a soup kitchen to serve those desperately in need. The church knew they were about to enter uncharted waters. Fear of the unknown, apprehension about the viability of this effort and church public image were some of the topics discussed. The vestry agreed, it would take faith and trust in God to make this new ministry a success.

On the first day the ministry opened, over 50 people were fed a hot meal. The gratitude, love and thankfulness that poured from that room were unbelievable. People, who had given up hope, people who were hurting and thought no one cared, was now finding relief in their community. I am glad to say 20 years later that the ministry is still proclaiming the love of Christ to all who enter the doors.

Over the past three Sundays, I have preached about stewardship. In my first sermon, I talked about faith and stewardship. One of the key points in that sermon was “Through prayer and faith, we decide in life our needs versus wants and our commitment to use what God has given us to build the kingdom of God. When we believe God has given us everything we possess, then stewardship becomes a daily way of life.”

The second sermon was about gratitude and stewardship. In this sermon I stated “Our goal in developing gratitude, is to recognize the gifts and talents we have are not our own, but given to us by God. In addition, because of God’s kindness, charity and love for us we are grateful and show gratitude to God, when and wherever possible.”

Last week, I preached about how we are formed in the image of God. How we daily practice our Christian identity, is corollary to our stewardship. Jesus confronted Peter with the question, “Who do you say I am.” For our Christian maturity and growth, this is a question we need to answer also. How you answer this question, will affect everything you do, especially

in stewardship. Answering this question helps us come to a deeper understanding about our identity in Christ.

Now that we have talked about faith, gratitude and the deeper understanding of our identity in Christ, what is God seeking from the body of Christ. He is telling us the same thing he told the disciples in Matthew 28:19 - 20 “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”¹ In other words, in a believer’s life and ministry, **Proclaim** to everyone, what the Lord has done for you!! How each individual performs his or her ministry will be different according to the gifts God has given them. God is asking us to be a partner in showing His love, grace and mercy to a hungry and thirsty world. Disciples are followers. Disciples are persons who have experienced the living Christ and pledged to him their deepest devotion. Disciples are not people who have reached their destination; they are people who are discovering their direction, often one-step at a time. That first step began at your baptism. Moreover, that journey of baptism continues each day of your life.

Indeed at baptism and the renewal of our Baptismal Covenant, we are affirming our belief, that we are God’s stewards. And because we are God’s stewards, we seek to proclaim God’s gift of salvation. In our Baptismal Covenant it says this:

Celebrant: Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

People: I will, with God’s help

In making stewardship a daily way of life, we reveal the importance of “proclaiming by word and example” God to the world. As John Westerhoff says, “Stewardship is what we **do** after

¹ New International Version, 2009, (Matthew 28:19-20)

saying “**We Believe**”, that is after we give our love, loyalty, trust and obedience to God, the God of our faith.”²

St. Thomas does many **good** things to proclaim the Lord throughout the year. Today in fact, after church we will have our annual Chili Luncheon and Pumpkin Auction. The children and others have donated many creative hours to make their pumpkins look great. The money raised from the auction will go to improve our Christian Education program. In addition, a specially decorated pumpkin is going to be auctioned, in which all the proceeds will go to help fight breast cancer. The women of our church are performing outstanding ministry. Do you realize that ½ of the ECW diocesan board members are from St. Thomas? These women are deeply dedicated and committed to their ministry. Our Daughter of the Kings chapter is very strong, as we witnessed during the recent installation of new members ceremony. As our annual Thanksgiving service approaches next month, we will gather enormous amounts of non-perishable items to give to Tri-County ministries. It is another way of tangibly proclaiming the love of Christ to another in need. Each month older members from this church, the community and Canterbury House, gather at St. Thomas for entertainment and to share a meal together. The name of this ministry is Young at Heart. For those who gather, it lifts their spirits, encourages their souls and gives them a positive experience. Many parishioners work hard to assure this ministry stays strong and vital each month. Our Bible Day Camp in the summer is important not only for this church, but for the surrounding community. Over 60 children converge on our property in the summer, for a week of playing, singing, crafts and feeling the love of Christ. For some of these children, this is the only time they will feel the love of Christ throughout the year. While we may not instantly see fruit bearing from our individual ministries, the message that men and women from St. Thomas are proclaiming Christ is being heard loud and clear.

² Westerhoff, John H., *Grateful and Generous Hearts*, Morehouse Publishing, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 1997. Pg. 7

One of the great hymns we have in our hymnal is Harry Emerson Fosdick “God of Grace and God of Glory.”

In the third verse it says, “bend our pride to thy control; shame our wanton, selfish gladness, rich in things and poor in soul. Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, lest we miss thy kingdom’s goal.”³ Our goal as Christians is to make stewardship a daily way of life. Because of our faith, gratitude, and formation, **we can** proclaim to the world our ministry of time, talent and treasure and not be ashamed. At times due to forces beyond our control or because of our own sinfulness, the ministry of stewardship will not be easy. During these pressure points in our lives, we need the strength, wisdom and courage of God, to help us make the right decisions. Johann Sebastian Bach would add the initial SDG after a composition. SDG means *Soli Deo Gloria*, which is **Glory to God Alone**. I pray your stewardship decision for St. Thomas will have appended at the end SDG. Amen.

³ The Hymnal 1982 according to the use of The Episcopal Church, New York, New York, Pg. 595.