

Stewardship: Gratitude or Duty?

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 23rd Sunday after Pentecost, October 30, 1988. Scripture Lessons: Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Psalm 119:33-48; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 12:28-34.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Keith Miller, an Episcopalian layman, tells of a song that was popular when he was growing up. It warned that you'd better watch out because "the love bug might bite you"- you might fall in love. And if you were bitten, you sort of lost your sanity. You found yourself doing things you never thought you'd do to make your loved one happy. I don't know how the lyrics went, but if any of you have ever had the experience of falling in love, you know what the song is talking about.

The year before I got married I spent about \$1000 on books and records. I could come and go as I pleased. On Saturday afternoons I could watch all the football games I wanted to. I had no curtains in the windows, no rugs on the floor and I never made my bed. I had no one to tell me to turn my dirty socks inside out. I've always been fascinated by astronomy. The year before I got married I was seriously thinking about buying a telescope that would cost about \$2000. Then the love bug bit me. I fell in love with Kay and a great transformation took place in my life. My life will never be the same. I stopped spending so much money on books and records. I forgot about buying a telescope.

I fell in love and my priorities were completely rearranged. When I got married I renounced those things which had seemed so important to me and yet I'm hardly experiencing what people think of as a life of sacrifice. I did it willingly and cheerfully because I chose a relationship with the one I love. As a result of my love for Kay I've made a *different set of choices* about how to spend time and money. And though I might complain about cleaning out the basement on Saturday afternoon when the Penn

State game is being played, still I wouldn't exchange my present life for *And although we fight and argue and disagree over how to spend money and raise our kids*

all the books, records, and telescopes in the world. I can't really say I've made much of a sacrifice. What I have is so much more valuable than what I gave up.

I think this is a pretty fair analogy of what happens when we discover that we love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and our neighbor as ourself. Our use of time and money change drastically, sometimes overnight, sometimes over a period of months or years. We want to spend our time and money more and more in ways that express our love for God and neighbor. When we love God, heart, soul, mind and strength, tithing, giving 10% of all we have to the work of the Lord, doesn't seem at all like a sacrifice. If we love God like that we don't think we're living a grim life of renunciation when we become involved with God's people in the work of Christ. We're in a love relationship with a Lord ~~we want to get to know and to live for,~~ and with some exciting new friends. We've come alive, and instead of giving only intellectual assent to a doctrine, we've become passionate about God and the love of people. This is something that happens when we love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

About this time every year the session draws up next years budget. We pray and we try to listen to what God wants us to do here in Oxford and around the world through our denomination. And then we come to you, the congregation, and ask you to support the budget with your tithes and offerings.

So often we make a big mistake. We preach about the necessity of sacrificial giving to people who may have joined a church but never consciously and specifically stepped into a committed love relationship with God which involves their whole lives. In other words, we ask people to pledge money to the work of Christ through the church when they might

not really love God, heart, soul, mind and strength. That's like you parents *demanding* that your teenage boy give up his free time and basketball and use his money for a girl with whom he has *not* fallen in love. Can you imagine the rebellion and resentment that would stir up.

I want to avoid that mistake because I believe that God doesn't want our money unless we love him. We can't tip God. We can't bribe God. We can't strike a bargain with God. I've had the experience in a big city of having a ragged panhandler come up to me and ask for a quarter. And sometimes I've given a quarter just to get him to leave me alone, not because I have any real love for him. Well, I wonder if we ever treat God like that. We make our yearly pledge or we drop our offerings in the collection plate as an attempt to get God to leave us alone for a little while not because we really love God nor because we are really committed to loving people through the work of the church.

But God doesn't want our money without our love. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah wrote, "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings. Bring no more vain offerings. This people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips while their hearts are far from me." And in our Gospel lesson this morning Jesus commends a person who says, "To love God with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."

God doesn't want us to sacrifice our money unless we love Him; unless we've entered into a personal relationship of mutual love with God. The apostle Paul wrote, "I may give away everything I have, and even give up my body to be burned- but if I have no love, this does me no good." God doesn't want our money, he wants all of us, heart, soul, mind and strength.

Writing to the Christians in Rome the apostle Paul said, "Because of God's great mercy to us I appeal to you: Offer *yourselves* as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him. This is the true worship that you should offer. Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God-- what is good and is pleasing to him and is perfect."

One of the secrets of Christian stewardship is that when love for God leads us to give our tithes and offerings to God through the church we're not making a sacrifice as the world thinks of sacrifice. We're in fact choosing a way of life which leads to a joy and fulfillment hitherto unknown to us.

Sometimes I think Presbyterians talk *too little* about making a total commitment of our heart, soul, strength and mind to Jesus Christ. We're afraid of being fanatical and there's no greater sin for a Presbyterian than to be thought of as a fanatic. Sometimes we Presbyterians falsely think that most people simply don't want to make a total commitment (or recommitment) to Christ. So often we make a pitch for minimal rather than total commitment out of fear that nobody really wants to totally commit themselves to God through Jesus Christ. We're asked only to show up at the morning worship service and make a pledge of money. The problem with the average church, though, is not that we're asked to commit too much but that we're not asked to commit *enough*. And consequently so many of us are neither hot nor cold.

Jesus Christ has *always* demanded an absolute allegiance to himself and to God's will. Of course that doesn't mean that no one can properly be called a Christian who doesn't have this absolute allegiance, but it is essential that we should *always* think of God as entitled to such total

commitment. If we're going to be God's people and carriers of his caring love into the pain of the world we'll have this as our goal. We may not be able to make the "total commitment" a reality except in fleeting moments. But what we can do is to tell God that we are "willing to be made willing" to give him our total allegiance.

In Jesus Christ we hear God say to us, "I love you. I love you as you are. I love you unconditionally. I have already given myself to you totally, and now all I ask is that you begin to respond to my love and my commitment to you by committing to me all of yourself that you are able to give."

And when we begin to respond to God's love in that way God goes on to say, "I'm going to begin to change you. I know that you have an inability to love me and your neighbor totally. But I love you so much that I want to change that. It may take a thousand years to make you a lover of people, of me, and of yourself, but I promise that I'll continue relentlessly until you've been totally transformed. I'll begin at the moment you give me your life.

If you have never committed your life to Jesus Christ or if you feel that you need to recommit your life and your love to him I invite you now to make this prayer your own:

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, I thank you for your love for me. I thank you that Jesus died for me; that he bore my sins in his own body on the cross that I might be dead to sin and alive to all that is good. And I thank you for his resurrection from the dead which enables me to share in eternal life. Lord, remove from me my doubts, my fears, my inhibitions, my sins which would prevent you from releasing the power of your love in my life. Lord Jesus, I commit to you all of myself that I am able to commit and ask that you will make me willing and able to love you with all my heart, soul, strength and mind.