

Introduction

This article contains much of the sermon I preached on September 27th. In the box to the middle of this page you'll find the five stewardship commitment points I made at the beginning of the sermon. I noted that I had learned the first four from The Rt. Rev. Furman C. Stough, onetime Bishop of Alabama and later Deputy for Stewardship (and much more) to his old college friend, Presiding Bishop Edmund C. Browning during the early 1990's. I met Bishop Stough within a year of my ordination to the priesthood when I served as the Associate Rector at St. Ann's in Sayville, New York (which is on Long Island in Suffolk County). Our relationship deepened over the years, and on his recommendation, I became Rector of St. Matthias in Tuscaloosa, Alabama in late 1994. It was there I became a Stewardship Training Consultant and under Bishop Stough's tutelage as well as his partner in this work, The Rev. Bill Yon, became well versed in what is known as the Alabama Plan.

I first heard Bishop Stough offer his four points about commitment when he came to St.

Ann's as an Assisting Bishop in 1991. His interpretation of the Pearl of Great Price from the Gospel according to Matthew changed my worldview. As time went on, I began, with his permission, to retell the story. Eventually, I expanded the story to make it reflect my journey in faith. The fifth point about commitment is an outgrowth of my participation in the work of the Stewardship Commission of the Diocese of West Virginia. We felt the guidance of the first four points begged for something more. I think Bishop Stough, who died some years ago, would be pleased with the fruits of our work: "Discipleship that leads to Apostolic Action is the outcome of that commitment."

My hope is to prayerfully help you with your own outcome. You might find a sense of peace with your decision if you, as The Rev. Bill Yon teaches with a wry sense of humor, hold your pledge next to your face as you look into a mirror. If you're frowning, you'll know it's too little or too much. If it's just right, your smile will be broad and as joy filled as that of a child who knows that he or she has done something quite pleasing in the sight of Mom or Dad. Perhaps the following retelling of my in-

terpretation of the Pearl of Great Price will help.

This story helps one understand what theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "The Cost of Discipleship." Bonhoeffer, a part of the Confessing Church in Germany that stood up to Adolf Hitler, was executed by the Nazis just days before his concentration camp was liberated. There's another reason I point out this fact, but it comes later in the sermon.

The Pearl of Great Price

Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it." (Matthew 13:45-46 NRSV)

The Pearl of Great Price The Inspiration and Teaching found in the Sermon preached on September 27, 2015 by The Rev. Dr. William Carl Thomas

Five Stewardship Commitment Points

1. Evangelism calls people to commitment.
2. Christian Formation teaches the meaning of that commitment.
3. Worship celebrates that commitment.
4. Stewardship is the practice of that commitment.
5. Discipleship that leads to Apostolic Action is the outcome of that commitment.

Imagine that you are that merchant. The pearl of great value (or great price in other translations), is the love of God found in Jesus Christ. You want that in the worst (or, hopefully the best) way. So you're not surprised when the "seller" shows up.

You ask, "What will it cost?"

The seller replies, "Give me everything you have."

You pat your wallet, pull it out, present it to the seller thinking you can get away with "everything you have on you."

The seller understands you all too well and says, "I think you're going to need a little help. Let's take a inventory."

"Do you have a house?" You nod yes.

"Does that house have a kitchen?" You nod yes again.

"Is there food in the refrigerator and the cabinets?" Again, your head, much like a bobble doll from the ballpark, nods yes.

And so the inventory goes. The seller learns that you have three bedrooms and closets filled with clothes. Your two cars in the garage also go on the list. You don't mind. The seller seems to have your best interests at heart.

Then it gets all too serious. The inventory moves to your bank accounts, your investments, your vacation home. Yes, the seller wants those as well.

But a little humor finds its way into the inventory. The seller is interested in your relationships that go beyond

money or possessions. Yes, you say, "Take my spouse." And, even more emphatically you literally cry with joy, "Take my teenage children!"

The exhaustive inventory is now complete. And you are as happy and relaxed as you have ever been. The seller, who you suspect might be God, is making it possible for you to have the pearl, which you know to be the love that is Jesus Christ.

You walk away content. You've given up everything but now you have the love found in Jesus. How could it be any better even if it seems so strange? Then you hear the seller's throat clear and you are stopped in your tracks. It was too good to be true, you think.

"You know all this stuff that I now have in my possession," the seller begins. "This is more that I need for right now. So would you please hold on to it for me."

Realization slowly sinks in to what the seller has just said. You now have the pearl (the love of God in Jesus Christ) and all your stuff back. All you had to do was simply be willing to sell all that you have to find that love. Wow! Are you happy or what! Everything looks just as it did before and you have Jesus as well. What a great deal!

You no longer walk. You're skipping. Literally jumping with joy. Then you hear the seller's throat clearing noise again. You stop. Your heart sinks as you're sure you are about to encounter "the other shoe dropping" right on your head.

The seller says, "I want you to remember that everything on the inventory is mine. The house, the food, the beds, the clothes, the cars, the money, the investments, those you love and care for, their mine. But I want you to remember two key things: I trust you, and you're my steward."

"There may come a time when I'll need you to take some of my food and feed someone who is hungry."

"There may come a time when I'll need you to take some of my clothes and provide for someone who is naked."

"There may come a time when I'll need you to use my car and visit someone who is lonely or in prison."

"There may come a time when I'll need you to take some of my money and use it for something you may not understand."

"I trust you. You are my steward."

Just as you begin to realize the impact of your new trusting relationship, you hear the seller say, "Oh, one more thing." One more, you think. What else could there be? "Your spouse and your children. Remember, they're mine. I'm trusting you to make the right decisions about their welfare."

And just as you wonder: doesn't trust go both ways, the seller looks you directly in the eyes, places a hand on your shoulder, and says, "You can trust me to be there when you least expect it and need it most. Really, while you may be my steward, you are also my friend and I love you."

Epilogue

This story that Bishop Stough used to place our relationship with God in the proper context could simply end here. The call to live into Matthew 25:31-44 (when did we see you naked, or in prison etc) is powerful. But as is always the case, if you look hard enough and listen deeply enough, you will find your own story in Holy Scripture.

In Mark 10:17-31 we meet a character often called The Rich Young Ruler. When encountering Jesus he asks, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus quizzes him about his knowledge of the commandments. The man replies, "Teacher I have kept all these since youth." This man, this rich young ruler, appears to be a good man seeking affirmation that his approach to life was the right one. Jesus shocks him with a demand about what we might see as the cost of discipleship, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

As we read or hear this, we enter into the man's dismay. Mark writes, "When he (the man) heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions." We hear nothing about this rich young ruler again in scripture. Mark, however, reminds us of what makes it possible to sell all we have and follow Jesus: "Jesus, looking at him, love him."

I know this to be true for I am very much that man who simply wanted affirmation that my approach to life was the right one. When I finally gave up my need for my many possessions I received more than I could ask or imagine: *the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe.* (Ephesians 1:19 NRSV) This power, this love, is the ultimate expression of the trust that God has in me. My continued hope is to have the faith to share the love that reveals my trust in God.

When I sign my name to my stewardship commitment card and make my pledge, I affirm that I am God's steward and that no matter what happens, I can trust God to guide me in the right use of all that God has given me: which is everything. When I hold the pledge card in front of the mirror and find my smile, I see in the reflection the same love that Jesus showered on my alter-ego, that rich young ruler who found his way back because of the immeasurable greatness of the power of that love.