

Sermon: Luke 18:9-14(Proper 25C and Stewardship Kick-off)
Christ Church Riverdale, 17 October 2010
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Luke 18:9-14 (The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-Collector)

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.’

When we do our planning here at Christ Church, we take into account the church calendar, the secular calendar, the school calendar, the federal holiday calendar (which is why we don't celebrate our parish anniversary over Columbus Day weekend, for example). I can absolutely promise you we didn't plan today's stewardship kick-off to coincide with this gospel story where the tither is the bad guy! With that being said, why is this Pharisee who gives 10%--who doesn't steal or cheat on his wife--the bad guy in the story? He's the bad guy not because he follows the rules, but because he's arrogant, and in his arrogant prayer he holds the tax collector, he holds another human being in contempt. (And by the way he's a Pharisee who happens to be arrogant and contemptuous. Most Pharisees were sincere and devoted.)

For all our lives we've learned from this parable of Jesus about the value of humility. There's a story about a Sunday School teacher who does a great lesson about this parable, then closes by praying, "God, we thank you for this beautiful day, for the opportunity to hear your word in church, and we thank you that we're not like this Pharisee" (And then you and I have to be careful not to pat ourselves on the back for not being like this Sunday School teacher!)¹

All of these "nots" are a key to the problem of arrogance in the story. The Pharisee is glad about what he is not; his thanksgiving is negative. But when God created the universe, was it "Let there not be?" No it was, "Let there be!" "Let there be!" The whole creation originates in God's loving generosity and Christian stewardship is how we respond to this "love so amazing, so divine." Human beings are created in the image of God and we live that image, however imperfectly, in God's world. Since we're made in the image of the generous God, generosity is part and parcel of what it means to be truly human!

When people say "3G" these days it refers to a kind of wireless phone and computer service--third generation. I have a 3G phone, but I believe stewardship consists of 3 "G's" as well: cultivating gratitude, generosity, and good sense in our lives. God creates the universe as

¹ Justo L. González, *Luke* Belief: A theological commentary on the Bible (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 213.

an act of love, and we exist--we are alive, we have what we have, because God loves us. How can we not be grateful when God is the source of our whole being?

Generosity is a response of gratitude to the abundant gifts we have received. How do we respond equally when the material gifts we are blessed with are more abundant in some lives than in others? In the Bible, God calls us to respond in proportion to our resources. By giving proportionately, a person of modest means can be just as generous in the eyes of God as a person of substantial means.

My wife Amy and I have been tithers for 15 years now--we've given 10% of our gross church income to the churches we serve. It's public record in the parish budget that my cash salary is \$48,075, but part of my compensation is living in the rectory. When you add the value of living in the rectory, including utilities, the total this year is \$71,604. To make it divide by 52 weeks, our pledge to Christ Church this year is \$7176, and although my compensation for next year hasn't been finalized yet, our pledge for 2011 will be 10% of that.

10% of income is the traditional proportion in the Bible, but I'm not going to tell you what percentage to give. I am going to invite you to reflect and pray about God's place in your life, about what Christ Church Riverdale means to you, and what percentage of your resources would for you be a response of gratitude, generosity, and good sense given your financial circumstances. If you're already at that percentage, congratulations! If you're not yet at that percentage, can you get there next year? Or can you get there over a period of years?

We live in a society with some distorted financial values and one of those distortions is the idea that generosity and good sense are opposites. We're always supposed to be on the lookout for lower prices--trying to find a cheaper deal--not to part with our hard-earned money without a fight. But thrift is not the same thing as stinginess.

A woman who lives here in the Bronx shows how good sense and generosity go together. Edith Calzado² is the single mother of a son in elementary school. Her husband was abusive so now she has a restraining order. Edith makes about \$16,000 a year--which puts her barely above the poverty line with a child to support, and she has about \$2,300 in debt. She uses credit cards a lot--takes companies up on their teaser zero percent interest rates. Edith takes advantage of them because she pays the cards off before the interest rate goes way up! Edith says she's borrowed about \$13,000 from Citibank this way, and has never paid interest, just the balance-transfer fee of 3 percent, which means that she borrows money at a better rate than big corporations.

Recently, she used one of these loans to treat her son Sammy to a vacation at a resort in the Dominican Republic where she was born. "I paid 103 dollars for my son and I, everything included, from Friday to Saturday," she said. "It was awesome!" Sammy said. "We also went to Ocean World. . . . I got to dance with a dolphin!" Edith is also good at signing up for store

² Ms. Calzado's story is drawn from Alex Blumberg, "Poor single mother with lots of credit cards. (It's not what you think.)" *All things considered* (National Public Radio) 15 October 2010, and "The art of living at the poverty line," (Interview with Edith Calzado) *Planet Money* (National Public Radio) 217.

credit cards where they give you 10 percent off your purchase —then quickly paying off the balance and closing the card. Sears, Toys R Us, the Gap, Old Navy, Wal-Mart: Edith has opened and closed cards at those stores before the companies that issue the cards could make a cent off her.

Edith has never been on Welfare, but does make use of government programs that she qualifies for, like Medicaid. When asked what her monthly grocery bill is, she said nothing: because she qualifies for food stamps and goes to food pantries. Even though Edith lives near the poverty level, she puts \$20 to \$30 into a savings account every month. She gives 10 percent of her wages to her church every week. Her credit rating is excellent. Sammy is in the gifted program at school. Edith Calzado is a steward who's not stingy, but she is thrifty: She still has the same pair of shoes she wore when she arrived in this country in 1997. She's grateful, generous, and she has a ton of good sense!