

October 23, 2022
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 25, Year C
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Joel 2:23-32
Psalm 65
2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18
Luke 18:9-14

Today at St. Thomas's we're kicking off stewardship season. Stewardship is one of those words we pretty much hear only at church. That's too bad, really, because there is value to be had in thinking of it more broadly. So let's start with church and then look beyond.

In church, stewardship is often described as a person's offering of time, talent, and treasure to the church. If you've been around a while, you probably *hear* stewardship and *think* money. That's not unreasonable. Admittedly, while stewardship season includes talk of time and talent, the focus is more on treasure. That's why it's timed for the fall, just ahead of budgeting for the following calendar year.

Stewardship is usually not a favorite subject of discussion in the church, perhaps because of its connection to money. Money joins politics, sex, and religion as topics to avoid in polite conversation. I like to think that our goal in church is to engage in *important* conversation. And sometimes important conversation is impolite. Rather ironically, our starting point is always one of those impolite topics, religion. Religion is the *terra firma* supporting our conversations about everything else, including money, politics, and sex.

With the money elephant now named, I'll say a little about the financial aspects of stewardship season. Here at St. Thomas's, we manage it differently than other churches do. At other churches, each individual or family receives a pledge card that they are asked to return stating their financial commitment for the following year. A big problem with this model is that so many people go so stuck when it comes to returning their pledge card. I'll confess that I'm always one of the foot-draggers. A large proportion of the cards never return. As a result, budgeting is both delayed and inaccurate. None of this is pleasant for anyone.

Several years ago, we shifted to a different model. As far as I know, we are the only church that does this. Our church recognizes that the best predictor of future giving is past giving. And it leverages the propensity of our relatively young demographic to give electronically and automatically. In short, for budgeting purposes, we can and do assume that your giving next year will be the same as this year. We ask you to tell us if it will change—that is, if you expect to *start giving* or to *change your giving*. But that's it. Since adopting this model, our budgeting has been spot-on. And no one, including me, has to deal with annoying pledge cards.

With all that said, let's now remember that stewardship really *is* about a whole lot more than money, even here in church. This is especially important to note here at St. Thomas's, because of additional factors associated with our relatively young demographic. This young demographic is the envy of most churches, and I wouldn't trade it. But it does affect our finances, and even more immediately it affects our volunteer staffing. For one thing, while other churches rely on a core volunteer pool of older retired people, we rely on people are growing or maintaining careers or raising children. For another thing, our members are more geographically mobile, and therefore we are constantly saying goodbye and hello. During the pandemic, departures continued as usual, but replacements lagged, and so our numbers dropped. They now seem to be rising. But right now the church needs volunteers across the board.

I hope that you experience something here at St. Thomas's that you feel is worth supporting. Your church leadership humbly encourages everyone who is a part of St. Thomas's to give generously to St. Thomas's of their time, talent, and treasure. You won't see a pledge card, but please ponder this over the next few weeks.

Now, let's now broaden the conversation. Yes, it's stewardship season in the *church*. But maybe it's also stewardship season in your *life*. If so, the question you might be pondering is something like this: considering the totality of your life, to what should you devote your time, talent, and treasure? To put it another way, here's the question I've been asking myself: How shall I deploy all that I am and all that I have, not just next year, but for the next ten years, both in the church and beyond the church?

I'm 60 years old and coming off of a sabbatical. Of course I'm asking questions about my future. But I don't think I'm the only person asking such questions. We are all living in a very odd and transitional time. We're over two and a half years into a pandemic. Many of us are questioning our assumptions about work and productivity. There is political turmoil unlike anything we ever could have imagined. There's a climate crisis that scares the pants off us.

You regulars know that I'm just back from two weeks of vacation. I have had the privilege of a lot of time off this year. I wish everyone had as much space for restoration and for re-creation. I had the space for training in three new areas of practice that are new for me: spiritual direction, coaching, and reiki. I still don't quite know exactly how they fit together or how they will manifest in my parish ministry. But I can say that the results are already showing up in small ways here and there.

Spiritual direction, coaching, and reiki are different from one another. But when practiced in a Christian context, they share at least one very important thing in common, and that's *the invocation of the divine*. To clarify, when practiced, rather than two, there are three parties present: the practitioner, the client, and the Holy Spirit. This implies a very optimistic understanding of the divine, as well as a very optimistic understanding of human nature. God speaks to every person and empowers every person, even those who need some help tapping into that divine energy. I'll add that spiritual direction, coaching, and reiki all require that the practitioner cultivate the ability to focus on another person. That has been good for me in these distracted and distanced times.

Last week Jakki and I watched the film *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. It was released in March to great reviews and is currently generating awards-season buzz. I highly recommend it to you. The plot is a bit complicated; consider that *The New York Times* named it a Critic's Pick, in an article with this headline: "It's Messy, and Glorious: Michelle Yeoh stars as a stressed-out laundromat owner dragged into cosmic battle and genre chaos."¹

You may remember Michelle Yeoh from the year 2000 film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. While this new film is billed as a comedy-drama, it also features Yeoh in martial-arts action. That review also says this: "... the movie is a metaphysical multiverse galaxy-brain head trip, but deep down—and also right on the surface—it's a bittersweet domestic drama, a marital comedy, a story of immigrant striving and a hurt-filled ballad of mother-daughter love."

I'll leave you to explore beyond that. But I'll say that *Everything Everywhere All at Once* is a great film, and at least one aspect of the plot relates to today's topic. It's complicated, but I'll do my best to explain. The premise of the film is that our universe is only one among an infinite number of multiverses. Each time a person makes an important decision in their life, they keep living that life, but a separate universe stems for the path not taken, and another version of them lives in that alternate outcome. The occupants of one particular universe have developed the ability to jump from universe to universe; they can temporarily occupy the bodies of their other selves in other universes.

The main character is that laundromat owner whose name is Evelyn. Her husband in this universe is a colleague in another universe; he comes from there to here, jumping in and out of her husband's body. He teaches Evelyn how to jump universes, and she briefly occupies herself in other universes that resulted from different life decisions she has made. In one she is a martial arts master; in another she is a movie star; in yet another she has hot dogs for fingers. She can also use the skills of those other Evelyns in this universe. She needs them, because a verse-jumping villain is after her and the whole world.

That's a lot, and there's much more. The point here is that, in the end, Evelyn learns that she is so much more than her current circumstances. Seeing the strengths of herself in other actualities, she feels less weighed down by the results of the choices she had made, and more optimistic about the possibilities of *this* universe. That gives her the imagination and the courage to initiate enriching life changes.

I want to turn briefly to the gospel reading for this week. It seems to me that the Pharisee criticizes the tax collector only because, deep down, he feels so inadequate himself. The truth is, I have sometimes been that guy, and I am still sometimes that guy, more often than I like to admit. The person in that self-exalted place *will* eventually be humbled, but that humbling doesn't require any sort of retribution from God. It's because the ground on which they stand is so very precarious that eventually it must give way. Feelings of inadequacy are never really corrected by throwing another person down. It works just the opposite, coming from a true recognition of the potential energy of God that resides in every person, everyone is lifted up. As we grow the ability to see that in others, we grow the ability to see it in ourselves. As we grow the ability to see it in ourselves, we realize how very precious we are. As we realize how very precious we are, we see that *we are worth the effort necessary to steward our very selves*.

That's where I've been going all this time: stewarding our very selves. As with just about everything, the first step is attention. Our lives are so full of distractions. As a result, we often operate on auto-pilot. When we pay attention, we realize that our lives are a series of micro-decisions, and every one of them is at heart a question of stewardship. Here's a simple example: When I need to wait for five minutes, what do I do? Do I check Facebook? Do I text a friend? Do I daydream? Do I, dare I suggest it, pray? There's no right or wrong answer. But there may be an answer that is better for you in the short term or the long term. With that in mind, you can steward your time by making intentional decisions about it.

That's just a very small example of a very big question. God works in you and through you. You are worth our own attention. Your life—all that you have and all that you are—is a gift from God. Only you can decide how to spend it. Remember: value it as much as God does. That's not narcissism—that's stewardship. Seek a deep understanding of the holiness that resides in you, and follow where it leads.

Notes

¹ A.O. Scott, "'Everything Everywhere All at Once' Review: It's Messy, and Glorious." *The New York Times*, March 24, 2022, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/24/movies/everything-everywhere-all-at-once-review.html> (accessed October 20, 2022).