

October 2, 2016
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 22, Year C, RCL
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Lamentations 1:1-6
Psalm 137
2 Timothy 1:1-14
Luke 17:5-10

Let's begin by talking about the Gospel reading for today. In the first part, the apostles ask Jesus to increase their faith. Jesus's response implies that he knows their faith is weak. It's tempting to imagine his tone here as angry or irritated, but I hear it instead as matter-of-fact. It is what it is. Jesus is either unable or unwilling to give them what they want. The illustration that follows seems to explain why: the increase in faith requires hard work.

You can't really blame the apostles for requesting a shortcut. After all, most people like the idea of a get-rich-quick scheme, and some people even fall for one. For example, I am morally opposed to state-sponsored lotteries. I see them as a reverse of Robin Hood—disproportionately, they take from the poor. Nonetheless, I sometimes buy a Powerball ticket when the pot gets stupendously high, even though I know the odds of payoff are stupendously low.

Metaphorically, the apostles were asking for the spiritual equivalent of a winning Powerball ticket. They didn't get it. A very few people have experienced a spiritual windfall; think of the great mystics like Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, or John of the Cross. But their windfall didn't happen because of spiritual Powerball. It happened because of hard work. I imagine it beginning with the quietest whisper of God's grace, God's invitation to simply show up. They did. And they kept showing up and showing up and showing up. Eventually, they got a bigger dose of grace. And then, they showed up some more. It's a currency of grace and commitment. Every great once in a while, grace arrives like a hurricane wind. More often, it's like the gentlest summer breeze. Either way, God's calls is to keep showing up. And that's not always easy.

For the apostles, for the mystics, and for us, the life of faith *is* hard work. Like those who came before, our job is to keep showing up and showing up and showing up. Sometimes, grace shows up, too. When it does, the only conceivable response is to show up some more.

To keep this in perspective, I don't expect that any of us operate at the level of spiritual Powerball. But we might reasonably expect something on the scale of a winning scratch ticket. To use a different metaphor, when grace shows up, there probably won't be angels singing; there probably won't be thunder and lightning. More likely, when grace shows up, it will be a fleeting moment that feels very quiet and intimate, something like the moment when a flower blossom reaches its moment of perfection. The experience can happen to anyone, at any time, in any place. I want to be very clear that you *can't* earn it—it comes freely from God. You can't order it from the great florist in the sky, but you *can* cultivate the soil from which it springs.

I hope that St. Thomas's is, for you, the home base from which you do that cultivation. I hope that you sometimes experience God's grace right here. I hope that you acquire tools, right here, that help you experience God's grace, out there. From acts of worship to acts of service, you might say that St. Thomas's is here essentially to facilitate your experience of those brief glimmers and shimmers of the beauty and power and goodness and love and compassion and generosity of God. You just have to keep showing up.

This is your annual stewardship sermon. Yes, fall stewardship season has arrived. If you don't know what that means, imagine something like the NPR fall pledge drive or the Muscular Dystrophy Marathon. We won't have radio essayist Ira Glass; we won't have comedian Jerry Lewis. I'm not clever or funny enough for any of that. But we'll have some education, some inspiration, some reassurance, and hopefully even some fun.

If you're new to The Episcopal Church, you may be wondering what this stewardship thing is all about. The bottom line is this: our church depends on the financial support of its current and past members. We are part of a diocese, The Episcopal Church in Connecticut, that provides us with *occasional* administrative assistance but *no* financial assistance. Let me repeat that: the diocese gives us *little* time and *no* money.

If you've been here a while you know that for many years this congregation has over-relied on endowment funds from past parishioners to meet its budget. The budget has been cut to the bone, and still we're dipping too deeply into our reserves. It's not an emergency situation, so don't fret: at the current rates of return and draw, it would take at least 20 years to deplete the endowment. Still, it's not a sustainable situation, so one of our goals together is to figure out how to pay our own way, and thereby to leave the endowment principle intact for the generations to come. Your church leaders are cooking up several initiatives to help do that, and at least one of them, unsurprisingly, involves *you*.

New folks occasionally ask me what it takes to join St. Thomas's Church. My answer is generally some variation of, "You just have to say that you want to join." That's the truth. No one gets turned away. Still, the hope is that your experience here will encourage you to offer something back to the community. My goal is not to make you feel bad—I am a proponent of guilt-free religion. So let me say it this way: Together, YOU are this congregation. Together, YOU are what makes the clockworks of this congregation tick. Together, YOU set the values and priorities of this community of faith. My job is to hear what YOU are saying. My job is to listen, and to help YOU, together, with the grace of God, be the community of faith that you dream of. The only way to get there is with YOUR help.

The nature of that help is often described as three-fold: time, talent, and treasure. I like the way a friend of mine summarizes it: presence, participation, and pledge. That is, the invitation is for you to become fully engaged in the life of his congregation by making three types of commitment: your *presence* in worship, your *participation* in community life, and your *pledge* of financial support.

Our stewardship goals are a bit unusual this year. To move toward closing our spending gap, we hope to exceed last year's pledge levels, but we're not targeting a specific dollar figure. Instead, our goal is this: that *every* person who attends St. Thomas's offer their commitment of presence, participation, and pledge. We are seeking 100% commitment. The circumstances of your life may necessitate that your commitment be small, and that's okay. Your commitment, at any level, is your investment in this community at this time.

There are a couple of things that make St. Thomas's unique in the church world. One is that we have a young population, by far the youngest I have ever seen in any church I have attended. The other is that, because we have many students and professors, our rate of turnover is exceptionally high. These things are blessings, because they lend us a vitality that is often lacking in churches today. This vitality gives us the possibility of creatively adjusting to our shifting cultural context. At the same time, those factors necessitate a creative approach to stewardship.

Therefore, we're going to try some new directions, directions that look a little like NPR or PBS. First, rather than thinking solely in terms of how much you might give next year, we are going to encourage you to make a monthly pledge that will last until you decide to stop it. Second, to facilitate this, we're asking everyone to switch over to automatic monthly pledge payments, either with checks written by your bank, or by debit or credit card. And third, we're hoping to ease away from one big fall campaign to smaller quarterly campaigns.

If you've been here at least since the spring, you may have participated in the priest-in-charge period goal-setting exercise with our diocesan consultant. Know that your vestry is in the final stage of using your feedback to develop concrete goals for action over the next two to three years. One of the three major areas of feedback was the need for financial stability, and this new approach to stewardship is one of the ways that we are addressing that. Your stewardship team is very excited to be taking some risks, all while having a lot of fun.

The other two major areas of feedback had to do with building up the community from within, and with the Church's relationship with the Day School. Yesterday St. Thomas's Day School had a special fall festival in celebration of its 60th anniversary. To reinforce that message, let me model the special balloon hat I wore. It was a wonderful day, and many people who attended commented on the great energy that is infusing the school this year. It's true.

I want to tell you one small story that really belongs to our Music Director, Simon Jacobs. Week before last, we had the first of our noonday concerts designed to include the Day School children. The older kids came in, and Simon gave them a ten-minute lesson and a thirty-minute concert. Then the younger kids came in, for ten minutes of lesson and music. One of the pieces he played for all the kids was a selection from Camille Saint-Saëns' *Carnival of the Animals*, called "The Cuckoo in the Depth of the Forest." In this piece, the organ made repeated "cuckoo" sounds, and the kids got it. We know that because when Simon came in on Tuesday, the kindergartners were in their playground. They greeted Simon and he greeted them, and then one of them said, "Cuckoo." This elicited a chorus of kindergarten "Cuckoos."

I think we're working hard, and God's grace is shining through. Wonderful things are already happening at St. Thomas's, and the future looks bright. I LOVE being here, and I hope you love being here, too. Keep showing up, and God will, too.