

What do you want to be? A Stewardship Sermon

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It has been agreed to by the Vestry and the Stewardship committee that today would be the 1st day of the Annual Stewardship campaign. On Friday, our church staff mailed to our members' homes a pledge card with a letter from our Stewardship committee. On Sunday, November 18th those pledge cards will be gathered on our Altar and offered to God. My role in all of this is to preach the much anticipated, always dreaded stewardship sermon. We never announce it ahead of time so that people will actually come to church. I feel blessed that we chose this Sunday to talk about stewardship. Today, we celebrate All Saints Day. I did not realize that when this date was chosen that it was the Sunday we celebrate All Saints Day, but I am pleased that it turned out that way.

Here at Christ Church, it has been the custom on All Saints day to invite the children of the congregation to dress in a costume that represents what they want to be when they grow up. It struck me that the greatest stewardship question, the one that engages the ultimate use of your time, talent, and treasure, is not any of the questions we usually ask in stewardship presentations. The ultimate stewardship question is not, "Will you tithe?" It is not, "Will you sign up for this church committee or that ministry?" It is not, "Will you run for the Vestry?" or "Will you increase last year's contribution?" The ultimate stewardship question is: "What do you want to be when you grow up?" This question we ask children goes to the heart of how an individual will use time, talent, and treasure.

In asking a child, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" we ask the essential question of stewardship. We have asked "How do you intend to spend the years God has given you using the talents God has given you to flourish in the life that God has given you?" Is it not a shame that such an important question stops being asked once you declared your major in college? Since this is a stewardship sermon I think we should explore the decisions you have made so far and look at some decisions going forward. And so, what do you want to be when you grow up? Children will often answer, "I want to be a doctor." "I want to be a teacher." "I want to be a firefighter." "I want to be a cowboy." "I want to be a pilot." They might dress up in a white shirt with a stethoscope and ... they are a doctor. They put on a yellow slicker, some boots and a helmet and ... they are a firefighter. They put on a broad rim hat, chaps, and boots and ... they are a cowboy. All fine and good except the question was not what do you want to do, but what do you want to be.

Let me say that I understand that ontologically there is nothing for us to achieve. You were created to be a child of God and you are, through no effect of your own. Every human life has value without having to aspire to anything else. You, as you, are precious in the eyes of God. On top of the goodness of your created being, how you exist ontologically, there is a sense that at least existentially, you can be better. Without denying that you are good, you can still want to be better.

So what do you want to be? Not just your job, your career, or what you do: What do you want to be? Let us hope, at least that you want to be a person of virtue. While ontologically all of us are valued, existentially some of us, not so much. Given the choice, parents want their child to be a hero not a criminal, a person of virtue not a person of vice.

When I was in Seminary, my ethics class had to write a paper after reading Nicomachean Ethics by the Philosopher Aristotle. The question for the paper was this: Is virtue more like science or more like art?

Aristotle answer to that question in Nicomachen Ethics was that knowing what is good and virtuous, the science, does not necessarily produce a good and virtuous person. Knowledge is good but it does not produce virtue. Virtue, Aristotle wrote, is more akin to the arts: to the musicians, to the dancers to the painters and even to the athlete. To be a good musician you must practice over and over until the movement becomes a habit, a motion performed quicker than the thought it takes to produce. One does not hit a 90 mph sinking curve ball by thinking about it or knowing about it! Virtue is like art because virtue is a practiced habit developed in the person over years of virtuous living. Ontologically, we all have value. Existentially, we must want to be good and practice the art of virtue.

So what do you want to be? The world renowned cellist Pablo Casals practiced his cello every day. When he was in his eighties, he was asked why he continued to practice. Casal's answer was "I think I am beginning to notice a difference." Even in your eighties, you practice what you do well because it makes a difference. Casals knew what he wanted to be and he never stopped striving to be better at it.

Again, the essential question of stewardship is "How do you intend to spend the years, the years remaining, that God has given you, using the talents that God has given you to flourish in the life that God has given you?" There is a mystery in Christianity, a truth that seems impossible but is none the less true. The mystery is that even though we are of infinite value to God, we can add to that value by sharing God's love. I am not a mathematician but infinity plus one seems like nonsense, yet in the supernatural realm infinite value can be added on to.

The church, the church universal as well as Christ Episcopal Church in Martinsville, exists to assist you, to strengthen you, to encourage you, through teaching, preaching, sacraments, ministries, programs, fellowship. Everything we do and are including this beautiful building, musical instruments, their up keep and maintenance, everything the church is and does is here to help you be better than you are, to direct and encourage virtuous living. We want you to be better for your life to flourish. From the day you are carried in here on your mother's hip until the day you breathe your last breath, you should be striving to be a better you. And, the church is here to help. If you want that in theological terms, the church is an instrument of grace in your life. Without grace you cannot be saved.

So, whatever your age, whatever you want to be, Christ Episcopal Church is here for you. We ask you to consider your stewardship in maintaining our presence for you and this community. We ask that you thoughtfully and prayerfully fill out a stewardship card and place it on the silver tray on the altar two weeks from today. You will be a better person for doing it. Amen.