

Sermon: The Rev. Poulson Reed
September 20, 2009
Proper 21 B Sermon

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

There's an old joke: A man and his young son went to church, and when they came out the father was complaining that the service was too long, the preacher was no good, and the singing was off-key.

Finally the little boy said, "Daddy, I thought it was pretty good for a dollar."

A lot depends on our expectations. Our expectations of church can be pretty high. But what about the Church's expectations of us? Does the Church ask of us too much or too little?

Well, if by the Church we mean Jesus, then the answer is seemingly too much. For Jesus' expectations for us can seem frighteningly high. "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and go to hell, to the unquenchable fire....and if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched." At which point we may want to use John McEnroe's old line to the tennis umpire: "you can't be serious!"

If we were geckos and could re-grow a hand or an eye, that would be one thing, but for human beings, Jesus' words seem a ridiculous demand.

Of course, we know Jesus is not speaking literally.

We are not literally meant to cut off a hand or pluck out an eye, but still, who among us has not been tempted by something we have seen, or grasped for something we were not meant to have? By Jesus' standard, not one of us would have an eye or a limb left. Measured against the strictest rules of behavior laid out in this passage, by which even being tempted by sin is sin, we all fall well short, each and every day. The expectations are very high.

But if we ask: does our **particular** church ask too much or too little, it gets more complicated. My sense is: most of the time, in most churches, we ask too little. Apart from money, we ask too little. Most churches are so eager to have new members that they have virtually no expectations, let alone requirements for membership. There may be requests for volunteers to do certain things, to stuff envelopes or teach Sunday school or help with coffee hour, but those requests are usually pretty low-key.

Except, of course, when it comes to money. At pledge campaign time, the tides reverse, and every parishioner feels a bit like a guest at a vampire convention.

No wonder pledge campaign time feels so awkward. All of a sudden, a church that never really asked its members to do that much is putting on the hard sell, saying that the church needs this money right now or it will have to cut its programs.

Parishioners feel like the church never calls except when the budget needs funding. The Vestry members look nervous. The priest starts to sound like one of those announcers on Public Radio at financial appeal time. And

everyone can't wait for the pledge campaign to end, whenever that may be, so they can go back to being the Church.

My friends, there is a better way. And our Scripture reading today suggests what it is.

As the whole of our gospel today shows, the Christian faith has plenty of room for both high and low expectations, **depending on where we are on our faith journey.**

For those who are new to the faith, or just exploring what a faith commitment might mean, let's remember that Jesus welcomed everyone into his fellowship. "Whoever is not against us is for us," Jesus says. That's a pretty low bar. And again Jesus says, "whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward."

Jesus is saying that for those who are drawn to the faith but are not yet fully committed, any movement into a deeper faith is welcome. For those around him who were in the crowd, at the edges of the community, any gesture of solidarity was a step in the right direction. Come closer; come and see, Jesus says.

But for those who are truly committed to following him, the core of the community, the disciples, Jesus offers the more demanding challenge of giving one's all. Take up your cross and follow me was never meant to be easy.

For the disciples, Jesus asks that we commit all of our being to following him, as if our hand or our eye or our foot depended on it. And yet, even for the most demanding faith, there is assurance that God forgives us when

we fall short, and gives us strength beyond our own capabilities for the effort. With God's help, the yoke is easy and the burden is light.

But what does this tell us about our stewardship, as begin our fall pledge campaign today?

I believe it tells us this, among other things: **that God loves us where we are, and invites us to go deeper.** God loves us where we are, and invites us to go deeper.

And so, if you are brand new to All Saints', if you came here a week or three weeks or a month ago, don't pledge. Not yet. Get to know this community. Spend time here. Get involved in a program. And when you decide to stay at All Saints' for a while, you can make a financial pledge, and begin to pray, learn and serve with us.

If you've been here for a while, coming most Sundays, getting involved in some things, I encourage you to think about how God has blessed your life. Think about the ways that God has touched you at All Saints' and elsewhere, and give not to meet the church's need, but out of gratitude to God. Give of your time, talent and treasure. If you pledged last year, I ask you to consider pledging a little more in recognition that all we have in life is God's gracious gift to us.

And if you're really committed not just to All Saints' but to being a disciple of Jesus; if you're ready, not to be a superhero of faith or a monk, but just to take your faith more seriously than you have before; if you're really interested in trying to figure out how to follow Jesus while still living your regular life, first of all, come to my class on Sundays at 9am. Because that's

what we're talking about: how to follow Jesus as regular people in the modern world with families and jobs and Cardinals' tickets.

And after you start coming to my class, I challenge you prayerfully to consider generously giving of your talents and abilities in service.

And secondly, I ask you to consider for your financial pledge the Biblical standard of the tithe: 10 percent of your income to the church.

Have a family conversation about it. Talk through the numbers. Consider your level of gratitude to God, and get your anxieties out on the table, too. I will tell you: that first conversation about tithing can be a scary, but exhilarating moment. And when you mention giving 10 percent to the Church in the middle of a recession, some of your family members may think you have lost your mind. But **talk** about it; talk about your giving.

When Megan and I were first married, we had some tough talks about how much we were going to give to the Church. We came from very different faith backgrounds, and we didn't have a lot of money. We wanted to support a number of different causes, and I already gave a lot of time to the Church. And so we began our giving modestly.

But each year of our marriage, we've given more to the Church. We like the automatic payment, each month, so we can budget it. And I'll tell you: some months it felt tight paying our bills. But when, after several years, we hit our tithe, 10 percent, that Biblical standard of giving back the first fruits of our harvest to God, it felt really good.

Now I'm taking a risk in telling you all this, because you might think I'm showing off. That's not what I'm trying to do. What I'm **trying** to say is that tithing is something we **all** can do, each of us. Not at once. But we can work towards it. We can get closer each year. Some of you do it already.

And I promise you: when you get to that point when you can tithe, it will deepen your relationship with God and with this place instantly. In that very moment. Because you will have said to God in that act: God, I thank you for all the blessings you have given me, and I trust that you will continue to bless me. I thank you, God. And I trust you.

Let's be the kind of Christian community here at All Saints' that welcomes everyone, wherever they may be on their faith journey, to walk with us as we all learn to follow Jesus more closely.

And then let's not be afraid to ask more of ourselves, to have high expectations. Let's give sacrificially in thanksgiving to God, and to ensure that the life-giving moments we have known here can touch the lives of others.

Let's take that leap of faith, together, into the loving hands of God. Amen.

