

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 23, Year B – October 13, 2024

“With God, All Things Are Possible”

The Rev. Anne Hartley

ALL SAINTS EPISCOPAL CHURCH

SOUTH BURLINGTON, VERMONT

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15 | Psalm 90:12-17 | Hebrews 4:12-16 | Mark 10:17-31

It's stewardship season again. That word makes some of us groan, but it's more than a time to raise money for the church. If Advent prepares us for Jesus' birth, and Lent prepares us for his death and resurrection, Stewardship season gets us ready for Thanksgiving. During this season, we count our blessings and give thanks for the time, talent, and treasure that you have selflessly given to this community these past years. I'd like to take some time to thank you for making it possible for us to worship here together today.

There are past parishioners who gave their time, talent, and treasure to this church, who deserve a great deal of credit. This church building has drawn people in for worship, Christmas pageants and puppet shows. We are deeply grateful to Janet Bessmer and Don Crofut, whose gifts help us so much with the maintenance and restoration of the building and grounds. These were their gifts to God and to us.

Today, I'd like to focus on each of you, good stewards of the church, starting with those of you who accepted leadership roles in recent years, who sacrificed family time and self-care, who dug deeper to help the church meet expenses, and who continue to tackle challenging projects. Just since I have known you, these include making the Louise Room accessible to everyone and protecting it from flooding (special thanks to the Wielenga family for their leadership, labor and gifts); working with the city to build continuous safe pathways for walking, jogging, biking, and hopefully some cross-country skiing; bringing the building up to fire code; and much more.

Other parishioners have given and give their time and talent. The neatly mowed lawn and bright flower beds are evidence of their pledge, their promise to be good stewards of God's gifts. So, too, are the beautiful flowers on the altar every Sunday. Others create a safe and welcoming place for children to play and learn and worship downstairs, so their parents may renew their spirits upstairs. Still others visit the sick and dying, share their musical gifts, get the church ready for services, watch over the money, clean the building (braving the occasional dead chipmunk or mouse nest), and organize bazaars to raise money for the community. Margaret warmly welcomes everyone, answers everyone's questions, makes bulletins for worship, creates and mails our newsletters, and much more. I'm realizing now that if I list all of her contributions and all of the other ministries, this service won't let out until dinner-time.

We are so grateful for all you have done collectively to lead this community through the pandemic and repeated clergy transitions. We have much to celebrate, and we also have a lot of work to do to keep up with rising costs of everything from paper to personnel. This week, you'll receive a stewardship letter with a pie chart that shows that, assuming that total pledges increase 5%, a funding gap of \$19,000 remains. We don't know exactly how the church will close the gap next year, but Mark's Gospel offers us some guidance on **how** to move forward.

In Mark, Chapter 9, Jesus tried a second time to tell his disciples that he would die and live again. He was trying to prepare them for the future. Jesus' teaching was the key they needed to unlock the meaning of events to come, but their fear kept them from understanding.

Several of the disciples were self-centered, obsessed with their own wishes and

desires. When Jesus asked them what they had been arguing about, they were silent, because they'd been arguing about which one of them was the greatest. As long as the disciples were focused on their own egos, their own ambitions, trying to rewrite the ending to Jesus' story, they would not be prepared for the future. Jesus needed them to surrender everything that kept them from trusting God—their fears, their opinions, their wishes and desires, and in today's reading from Mark, Chapter 10, their possessions.

Today's passage is not to be read as a new law, that to inherit eternal life, everyone must sell their possessions, give their money to the poor, and follow Jesus. When the rich man heard Jesus say that, he was shocked and went away grieving. This verb for grieving in Greek has an intensity to it. Two possible interpretations of this grief are that he knew he couldn't part from his possessions, so he grieved the loss of his divine inheritance. Alternatively, he knew he would sell his possessions, and that decision caused him pain and distress.

It is hard to let go of our possessions, isn't it, mostly because we fear losing things we associate with them—memories of loved ones, a sense of security, or social status in this world. All of these prevent us from depending on God fully, from trusting that God will comfort us and meet our needs. If we're clinging to material goods in this life, we're not moving into the spiritual life Jesus promised.

Jesus was not punishing the rich man or even judging him. Jesus told him **with love** to sell his possessions, so he could let go of the material world and experience the spiritual world. Jesus wanted a richer life for the man than the one he already had.

As disciples ourselves, let's take some time this season to reflect on the ways in

which we are clinging to the material world. Are we open to hearing God's call or are our lives too busy to listen? Do we resist change? Are we more comfortable with keeping things the way they are, even if that harms us and others? Are we thinking more about ourselves and ignoring people who are hungry, naked, sick, or imprisoned?

Jesus called on his disciples to become like children, open and receptive to the kingdom of God here and now. During this stewardship season, we turn our church and community over to God, who gave them to us in the first place, and pledge to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit moving in us and through us. We need everyone to be praying, listening for a sense of God's call, discerning the path forward, and helping to lead.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, we thank you and praise you for all of the gifts you have given us, for all of the time, talent and treasure that continue to flow into and within our beloved community.

Help us to be faithful stewards of everything that you have entrusted to us. We trust you to watch over All Saints' people, its finances, buildings and grounds, and its many ministries.

We pray for courage to keep giving, even when we feel we have little or nothing left to give.

Please, God, don't let the distractions of the world or our own fears hold us back from rebuilding our church.

Open all our senses to the Holy Spirit moving in and through the world. Help us to find new ways to serve our community.

Help us to keep our challenges in perspective, remembering that others struggle and suffer greatly.

Help us to remember that our building exists only so we have a place to praise and worship you, so we may be strengthened and renewed by table fellowship, so we may go into the world to do the work you have given us to do: to serve the hungry, the poor, visiting the sick and imprisoned.

We cannot do this on our own, but for you, God, all things are possible. We trust you to lead us into the future. Amen.