

The Rt. Reverend Dan Matthews  
Sermon at the 9:00 Service at St. John's Episcopal Church, Roanoke  
Sunday, October 26, 2008

*[Some portions of this transcript are paraphrased due to unclear audio on the tape. Toward the end of the sermon, the comment about tipping is inserted from the 11:00 sermon. It was not a part of the 9:00 sermon but was a favorite of the person making the transcription !)*

It's a joy to be here with you all this Stewardship Sunday at the kind invitation of your rector and my friend.

I haven't been to this parish before, and I like it. I commend you on what a beautiful place you have. I have been wandering around and gotten lost twice this morning already. But it is a marvelous place, and I am sure you know you are with blessed with such a space to worship the Lord.

I love the story of the mother cat. She was out on a stroll with her three kittens on a day like today. Suddenly on the horizon, the mother cat saw a big, ferocious dog coming, so she quickly took her little kittens and squeezed them in under a porch in a tight little space where she knew they'd be safe from the ferocious dog. So she turned after placing the kittens under the porch, and she started off toward the dog. The two of them got closer and closer and closet together until they were almost nose-to-nose, and the mother cat looked right at the dog and said, "Ruff, ruff, ruff!" With that, the dog turned 180 degrees and went right the other way. Then the mother cat went to the porch and squeezed in where the kittens were. She sat down in front of the kittens, looked them straight in the eye, and said: "Now I am going to explain to you why I insist you learn a second language!"

We grow up learning and knowing the language of the dominant culture. We all know that language. We speak it well, just like that! But when we come here on Sunday morning, it's a different language. It is quite different from the language of the street that we know in our dominant culture. This is the language that talks about things in a different way. For example, the language of the street that you and I grew up with, and know well says: I earned it, I made it. I went to school and learned it, I worked hard for everything. It's mine. I learned , I made it. It's mine.

When we come here, the language changes drastically. The language here says All things come of thee, O Lord. Wow, that's radically different from the language I learned. The language here says all things come from God, and I am blessed with what I have from God, but it isn't really mine at all. As the rector said a moment ago: I am a steward taking care of what God has entrusted to me. It all, it all comes from God. But, that's not the language of the street. That's not the language you and I grew up with!

We Episcopalians have not done very well teaching the language that all things come of thee, O Lord. I have a friend who is a Mormon. He happens to be one of the seventy Mormons who run the whole Mormon Church worldwide in Salt Lake. Ralph Hardy was in Washington D.C., and Ralph and I are on a board together. We were sitting together during the time of one of the primaries when one of the men running for president of the United States, as you well know, was a Mormon, the former governor of Massachusetts, and so we were talking about it, and I said to him, "Ralph, how do you get Mormons to tithe? Every one of them, 10% across the board, how do you do that?"

He replied, "You must understand that a Mormon child grows up knowing this: First you **learn**, then you **earn**, then you **return**. **Learn, Earn, Return.**"

I said, "We Episcopalians have something a little bit like that. Episcopalians learn it this way: First, you **learn**. Then you **earn**. Then you **retire**."

Knowing the language of this place ... against the language we all have grown up with is difficult. Learning a second language is always difficult. And yet we have to practice that language. You have to come back week after week or we tend to forget. We tend to lose that second language just like that unless we work at it.

There is a man who goes around the country speaking at Rotary Clubs and high schools. He's a magnificent speaker; his name is Charles Plum. Charles Plum is a kid who wanted nothing more than to fly airplanes in the Navy. He got an appointment to the Naval Academy and graduated, and he could hardly wait to get to Viet Nam. He flew 75 missions over Viet Nam, and on his 76<sup>th</sup> mission, he was shot down. He ejected and floated down in his parachute into enemy territory. He was a prisoner of war for five years. When he got out of prison and came back home, he was a hero. Everybody wanted to meet him, hear him, listen to him. He went around the country speaking for some years.

Charles Plum was out to dinner one night with his wife in a restaurant, just the two of them. Suddenly he got a tap on the shoulder. He turned around and looked up. He saw a man he'd never seen before.

"You Plum?" the man asked.

"Yes, I'm Plum."

"Did you fly off the Kitty Hawk in a jet in Vietnam?"

"Yes, I flew off the Kitty Hawk." There was silence.

Finally, the man, in a self-conscious moment, said, "Well, I packed your parachute?"

Plum looked at him. He was so shocked; he didn't know what to say, so he didn't say anything. He just sat there. Finally after an awkward silence, the man said, "Well, I guess it worked!" And he turned and walked away, never to be seen by Charles Plum again.

Plum went home that night; he couldn't sleep. He wandered around the house all night. He thought: How could I have never even thought about the man standing in the hold of the ship, carefully folding my parachute, fold after fold, with my name right on it? And I never even once thought about him. And I went around the country telling everyone what a hero I was and it never even once entered my mind that someone saved my life by packing my parachute.

And if I **had** thought about it, I wouldn't have done anything because I was a ring-knocker from the Academy. I wouldn't have spoken to him? He was a lowly sailor. Why would I ever speak to him on the deck of a ship!

Charles Plum still speaks today. He's a spell-binding speaker, someone you may have heard. He has changed his speech. His speech is now titled: Who Packs Your Parachute?

I love the story, probably the best story, the most popular story in the New Testament. Jesus made it up to make a point. You know it well. It is the story of the Good Samaritan.

There are three philosophies of life in this Biblical story Jesus made up. The first philosophy is the robber's philosophy: **"What's yours in mine, and I'll take it."** We don't worry about that philosophy. We don't think that way. There are very few people who live with that philosophy. That was the philosophy of the robber. He beat up the man and left him in the ditch to die.

The second philosophy of life is that of the two people who walked by the man in the ditch, the man who was about to die. They went [whistling] and walked on the other side of the road. Their philosophy of life was **"What's mine is mine, and I'll keep it."** That's just common sense, isn't it. I earned it, I made it, it's mine. I'll keep it.

That's the philosophy of the language of the street. That's the philosophy of the language in which we grew up. That's the philosophy that **isn't** the philosophy of this place, the philosophy that has made this place what it has been for many, many, many decades.

The third philosophy of life is that of the Samaritan. He came by, saw the man in the ditch, lifted him up and carried him to the inn. He placed money on the counter and said to the innkeeper, "Here is enough money to take care of this man until he is well. And if this is not enough money, take care of this man and put it on my bill. And the next time I come through I will pay the bill.

The third philosophy is **"What's mine is yours, and I'll share it."**

No wonder it's such a powerful story! No wonder it's one of the most popular stories in the whole New Testament. No wonder we all know it by heart because it bespeaks the language we want to speak but find the domination of the culture teaching us every day a different language.

Yes, what stewardship is all about is about saying all things come of thee, Lord. It is a Sunday when we get a tap on the shoulder. And the tap on the shoulder says, do you remember my blessings that I have given you this year? And then God says, I guess it worked.

Most blessings we don't even remember. Most of the blessings that come into our lives, we don't even stop to acknowledge. They're just good luck. They are just things that happen. And we think we earned them all. And we can say It's mine and I'll keep it. Like the two walking down the road, What's mine is mine and I'll keep it.

Stewardship is not about St. John's and its needs. We know St. John's needs resources, but that's not the primary reason at all. The primary reason for today is the language of this place. It says: "Oh, I forgot the blessings of the past year. There are so many, I can't name them." But then I say, "Thank you, God, for the many blessings, so many I can't remember them all. I return a small portion, a tip, a tiny percent in thanksgiving for all my blessings in my life."

You know, a tip is a funny thing. We go out to eat at a nice restaurant and think nothing of leaving a tip, 15 percent or even 18 or 20 percent. But then we balk at giving the Lord a tithe, only ten percent! Isn't the Lord worth at least as much as a waiter?

Stewardship is about me; it's about me and my blessings, and the tendency to have forgotten who they came from.

Thank you, Lord, for this stewardship Sunday

Thank you, Lord, for tapping me today on the shoulder.

And thank you the chance to return a portion of thanksgiving for all your blessings in my life. Amen