

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable to you, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.*

I'd like to begin our thinking this morning by asking you to turn in the prayer book to the General Thanksgiving found on page 836. Let us pray it together.

Accept, O Lord, our thanks and praise for all that you have done for us. We thank you for the splendor of the whole creation, for the beauty of this world, for the wonder of life, and for the mystery of love.

We thank you for the blessing of family and friends, and for the loving care which surrounds us on every side.

We thank you for setting us at tasks that demand our best efforts, and for leading us to accomplishments which satisfy and delight us.

We thank you also for those disappointment and failures that lead us to acknowledge our dependence on you alone.

Above all, we thank you for your Son Jesus Christ; for the truth of his Word, and the example of his life; for his steadfast obedience, by which he overcame temptation; for his dying, through which he overcame death; and for his rising to life again, in which we are raised to the life of your kingdom.

Grant us the gift of your Spirit, that we may know Christ and make him known; and through him, at all times and all places, may give thanks to you in all things. *Amen.*

The Vestry and your stewardship ministry team prayed this prayer yesterday during our work together. It seems to be to be an excellent place to begin when one is thinking of stewardship.

But, before going on, allow me to make the connection to today's gospel. We heard Jesus ask: "Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?" To pose the question in a more personal way, what can we give in return for the gift of life? What can we give in return for all the many gifts of God? For the splendor of the whole creation? For the beauty of this world? For the wonder of life? For the mystery of love? What can we give for the blessing of family and friends, and for the loving care that surrounds us on every side? What can we give for being given the gifts that lead us to best efforts and to the accomplishments that satisfy and delight us? What can we give for the latest gift God has given us, the gift of this day, this opportunity to be one of God's children in this world? What can we give for the love and comfort of God that is with us at the times of disappointment and failure? And what can we give for God's greatest gift of all, for the gift of God's only Son, Jesus, our Lord and Savior? What can we give?

Well, Matthew Fox, the Episcopal priest, theologian and exponent of creation spirituality, who, mirroring the thoughts of Meister Eckhart, the mystic philosopher, said the most reverent prayer that humankind can offer is just two words, "Thank you."

Or in the words of Meister Eckhart himself, "If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough."

Thank you, God, for all the gifts you give us. Thank you for your love and generosity. Thank you also for the forgiveness you give us when we fall short of the mark. Thank you for all that is. For you are the giver of all that is. You are the giver of all that we call ours. You give us the gift of life.

It seems to me that thanksgiving is at the root of an understanding of stewardship. As has been said, stewardship is all that we do after we say ‘we believe.’ In a few minutes we will profess our faith in the words of the Nicene Creed. We will profess our belief in God the Creator, “maker of heaven and earth, and of all this is, seen and unseen.” God has created all that is and entrusted to us all that we call ours. And this begins our understanding of stewardship. All that we call ours is a gift from the loving, generous God. What can we possibly do to respond to such incredible gifts of generosity?!

It seems to me that our first response is one of thanks. Humble, heartfelt thanks. Words of thanks and praise. But, for me, words are not enough. I need to do more than offer words of thanks, no matter how heartfelt the words. I need to give something back. And it was only when I realized that, only when I began to make loving, generous, sacrificial offerings to God that I began to develop a wholesome relationship with God.

You see, prior to that time, I had been the receiver. I had been receiving, taking all the good stuff God was giving me, without giving much, if anything, back in return. There was no relationship, since I, the receiver, was giving nothing back.

It was at a stewardship conference where I met some people who gave me what I consider the most precious gift that one person of faith can give another. They gave me the gift of their story. They were wonderful and very positive and compelling stories of faith. They told me how they experienced the love of God and the power of the Holy Spirit. They talked about Jesus Christ as a daily companion, not merely someone who lived two thousand years ago. They witnessed to the spiritual disciplines they embraced in order to be the people God created them to be. They spoke about daily prayer, regular corporate worship, Sabbath time, meeting with a small group of people weekly to engage scripture and to pray for one another, and to being intentional proportionate givers. And, for all of them, the percent they embraced that began to represent their thanks to God was ten percent. They were tithers!

It was their witness that jumpstarted my own spiritual journey. You see, I was a banker, a miserly banker, who gave out of a sense of guilt and believed in the old adage, “give until it hurts.” But I had a low pain threshold. But because of the witness of these wonderful people, I became an intentional proportionate giver, one who gave sacrificially, returning a portion to God of what God was so generously giving to me. I began making offerings rather than merely dropping a few dollars in the offering plate. These offerings drew me into a closer, more intimate, relationship with God. The offerings drew me into God’s loving arms. It was through this that I realized my need to give, to make thanks-offerings.

And it was as a result that I learned that stewardship is not about the need of the church to receive but about my need to give. I/we are created to give generously as God gives generously. We are created to love as God loves and forgive as God forgives. I learned that it is about giving until it feels good.

I said earlier that stewardship is everything we do after we profess our belief in God. Stewardship is about discovering our God-given gifts, developing those gifts, and using them to do God’s work in the world. More importantly, stewardship is about giving thanks. It is about thanks giving.

What can we give in return for the gift of life? In the words of St. Paul to the Colossians, as reported by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*, “Cultivate thankfulness. Let the word of Christ have the run of the house. Give it plenty of room in your lives. And sing, sing your hearts out to God! Let every detail in your lives, words, actions, whatever, be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God the Father every step of the way!”