

Stewardship Message
Grace Episcopal Church
Oct. 1, 2017 | Rick Elgandy

I'm delighted to serve as vice chair of the Stewardship Committee this year, and John and Mike have invited me to share with you a meditation on some of the themes that we've used to understand our stewardship campaign this fall.

You'll notice on this year's pledge cards the phrase, taken from 1 Chronicles 29 and the hymn that begins with the same words, "All things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee." We considered using a similar passage from 1 Corinthians – where Paul asks, "What do you have that has not been given to you?" – but decided that was slightly less poetic and more confrontational than our unfailingly polite Episcopal scruples could bear to put on a pledge card.

Those thoughts have brought me back to just how strange, how counter-intuitive it is to declare, as we have in saying the Creed this morning, that all things, seen and unseen – including ourselves – are truly *creatures* of God. It's true that we're called to gratitude in response to what we've been given, but I think it's all too easy to forget that what we've been given includes our very selves. We think about stewardship as managing responsibly and generously the fruits of our labor, sometimes neglecting, I think, that our energy, our talents, what health we may enjoy – every little bit entailed in that labor itself! – is a radical and unconditional gift of God. We owe God thanks and praise not just for everything we own, but for everything we are, for we truly have, and are, nothing that we have not received.

Meditating from this perspective, we are reminded of the good news: that God ceaselessly gives to us all we are able and willing to receive. And maybe also what we might experience as the less-good news: that we are finally totally unnecessary, that we are absolutely dependent on a mystery we little understand, and that we can only take credit as (very) junior partners in our own character and accomplishments, if at all. We do not choose whether or not to be vulnerable: there is a vulnerability written into our very life that we either accept or attempt to flee from (or some mixture of both). We do not "merit" what we have, at least not as we stand before God, because the very strengths, the selfsame effort on which we trade are themselves a form of charity to us – we who are, apart from God's creative gifts, literally nothing. The Gospel breathing through the doctrine of creation is that God first loves us into existence, loves us for no reason or purpose other than the overflowing love that makes up the very life of God, and the burning desire of that love to share itself with us. So deep runs that desire that it creates us from nothing to be with us.

Now I know that's a lot of theological architecture for a short message intended to ask you to fill out a pledge card. My point is this: there are many good and sensible reasons to pledge to Grace. You may be grateful that this place, and these people, hold space for you to pray, to reflect, to encounter God and community. You may have experienced many churches in your time, and know that our unendowed church is both precious and dependent on you. But, if I can push this even a bit farther, I think the pledge card is also a token of a spiritual discipline, an invitation to each of us to live more deeply into the joy and terror of releasing some of our (apparent) control, to hold a bit more loosely some of the resources – time, talent, and treasure – that we think will establish and secure our place in the world. It is a small means, in other words, of saying “yes” to the basic, wonderful truth about us: that we receive our very life and steward it for a time, offering it back to God, thus joining in the gift-giving that gives us our very selves. This season, as we make responsible decisions about our personal finances, our church budget, and the ministries we would like to support, I pray we will also remember that, finally, we have nothing that we have not received – that all things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee.