



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Reverend Ken Brannon, Vice-Rector

St. Michael and All Angels, Dallas, Texas

Money Matters

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, September 26, 2021

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

Introduction

Good morning! Thank you for being here today, whether in person or online. And thank you, Bishop Wolfe, for inviting me to preach today. It's a real honor.

It's great to be back in New York City. Rachel and I lived here for almost ten years in the 1990's, with church connections at Trinity Wall Street, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, the Church of the Holy Trinity, and the Church of St. Barnabas in Irvington. It's great to be back!

I have so many friends on staff here at St. Bart's. Michael Collins and I have known each other for decades; somehow, he tracked me down in Texas. Andrew Mullins and I know each other from Sun Valley, Idaho, a place he visits often and where I served as Rector for 12 years. And Dean Wolfe used to serve as Vice Rector at Saint Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church in Dallas, the seat I hold now. It's nice to be in such good company.

I know some of you might be worried about having a preacher from Texas this morning. Texas is in the headlines a lot these days. All I can say is, "It's not my fault!" You'll be pleased to know I have my vaccination card with me today.

My purpose today is to talk about money. Your annual stewardship campaign has just begun. Now I know what you're thinking. It's like when you tune in to NPR at the end of a long day, and all you want to hear is the news, and you realize that you've stumbled into fundraising week. Please don't tune out this morning. Money matters. How we relate to money can lead to great faith or great fear. Jesus knew that. That's why he talked about money more than any other topic except the kingdom of God.

Let me start by saying that your annual giving campaign will be fine. God is faithful, and you will raise what you need for the coming year. But stewardship is not just about getting by. Stewardship is about adopting a manner of life that is grateful and generous. In order to get there—in order to experience the joy and freedom of giving—we may need to undergo a kind of conversion. If we want to move from fear to faith, we may need to be healed of past wounds related to money.

I will focus on three areas of giving today: 1) why we give, 2) how we give, and 3) what happens when we give.

Why Do We Give?

First, why we give. There are lots of bad reasons to give: guilt, shame, intimidation, manipulation, arrogance. None of these will lead us closer to God. As people of faith, we give because God gives. Consider the biblical witness: Creation is the outpouring of God's abundant love. Wisdom is the fruit of fidelity to the Law. Prophecy is God's word breaking in, keeping us safe and secure. The Incarnation of Jesus Christ is a powerful act of divine self-giving. The Resurrection is the culmination of love's victory. The Holy Spirit gives us daily comfort, guidance, and strength. Why do we give? We give because God gives. Everything we have comes from God.

We also give because Jesus showed us how. He admired the widow who gave all that she had and instructed the rich young man to sell everything and follow him. Jesus taught his disciples to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. In today's lesson, Jesus urged his followers to put the kingdom of God first, making his point by suggesting that even physical maiming would be better than missing out on abundant life in God. Ultimately, Jesus gave his life for our sake, and God redeemed him from the grave. We give because God gives, and because Jesus shows us how.

How Do We Give?

The next question is "How do we give?" There are many ways to give. We give time, we give talent, we give treasure, we give a listening ear, we give a second chance, we give forgiveness. There are countless ways to give.

But today, I want to focus on giving money. Money can be a powerful sign of God's love. That's why we bring money forward at the offertory and bless it in God's name. Yes, money can be dangerous, but it can also be a powerful tool. When money is given freely in love, it can multiply in ways that we don't understand.

The biblical standard for giving is the tithe—10% of our income, whether earned or from realized capital gains. This is something that my friends in Texas get right. Tithing isn't just an old-fashioned concept; nor is it reserved for Baptists and Mormons. Tithing is a time-honored way to get serious about who (or what) we're putting first in our lives. Our giving to God isn't something we throw into the plate after all our other wants and needs are met. Our gift to God comes first. When we tithe, we make a bold statement about the centrality of God in our lives.

However, talking about tithing can make us defensive. Like Kubler-Ross's stages of grief, we cycle through denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. We can't imagine giving that much money away, and we make excuses about why tithing doesn't apply to us.

Learning to give—really give—is a process. It doesn't happen overnight. If you're not ready to tithe, if you're just beginning the process, you can give proportionally. Simply determine a percentage of your income—1, 2, or 3%—and pledge or give that amount. Often, you'll find that even this modest percentage is significantly more than you're giving now. If you increase the percentage over time, you'll soon be tithing. I'm in process, too. I don't claim to be an expert. But with the help of friends and mentors, I am moving in the right direction.

Let me offer a few caveats that might be helpful at this point. Your pledge is not a bill. You only need to give if you have income of some kind. If you are unemployed or have no income, there is no obligation to give money. Just give your prayers, presence, and participation.

What about taxes? Should you calculate your giving based on gross income or net income after taxes? That's your call. Just pick a percentage and give. Either way, you will probably be giving more than you do now.

Can I count all my giving toward my tithe, or only my giving to the Church? Giving is good and there are many ways to build up the kingdom of God. As Christians, it is important to give a significant share to the Church, because the Church is the Body of Christ.

What Happens When We Give?

We've talked about why we give and how we give. Now let's talk about what happens when we give.

First, we benefit personally. Although it can be scary at first, over time we enjoy the benefits of having our priorities in the right order. We experience less anxiety over money and more joy in giving to something bigger than ourselves.

Second, we benefit culturally. Our culture is in crisis right now when it comes to income disparity. We know and feel that something is deeply wrong. When we trust God with our money and give much of it away, we begin to heal what is sick in our society.

Finally, the kingdom of God grows in ways that we never expected. Giving is not a $1+1 = 2$ proposition. The Bible is full of examples of simple acts of giving that are amplified through the mercy and generosity of God.

Here's my challenge for you today: Don't make St. Bart's beg for a donation. Surprise the church with a timely and sacrificial gift. Consider all the good it will do. St. Bart's is not only creating beautiful worship, offering interesting classes, and helping people mark life's milestones; St. Bart's is also feeding the poor, housing the homeless, healing the wounded, and creating a safe space for the seeker. Can you imagine what it would look like if everyone at St. Bart's tithed? You would have more than enough. You would have gifts to overflowing. This would be an encouragement, not only to your community, but to churches around you as well.

But here's the rub. Giving requires trust. Sacrificial, open-hearted giving requires trust in God, trust in your church's leadership, trust in your fellow parishioner, and trust in yourself.

Many of us have been hurt by money. We have seen the damage that money can do. I know what this feels like. When I was in college, my father lost everything because of an unwise investment. He didn't diversify his holdings, trusted the wrong people, lost everything, and declared bankruptcy. In a family with only one income, this was devastating. It not only weighed on him personally; it also caused financial stress for the family that continues to this day. I know what it means to be hurt by money.

But my journey toward greater giving has helped me heal. Granted, I'm smarter now, because of what happened to our family. I use discretion about where and how I give. But a traumatic experience with money doesn't let us off the hook. It just means we have more opportunities to experience God's grace. I can't even count the ways that the Christian community has been generous to my family and me over the years. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Conclusion

Money matters. It has the power to heal and the power to harm. Our relationship with money affects every part of our lives. My prayer is that you will put money in its proper place—in service to God and the community of faith. When you do, you will discover that God’s generosity has no bounds, and that your gifts, offered in love, can bring about the healing and hope we so desperately long for.

Amen.

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For information about St. Bart’s and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022