

Stand up and be counted

A sermon preached by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on October 19, 2008, the Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost.

Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." Matthew 22:21

My father grew up in the tidewater area of Southern Virginia and loved the sea. His first great adventure out on the high seas was when he signed on as a steward on a ship bound for Hawaii. As a ship's steward, he was responsible for the provisions on board during the voyage. I think of the imagery of a ship's steward or flight attendant as we approach the stewardship season in the life of the church.

Stewardship is about our responsible use of everything God has given us. How we relate to everyone and everything else in this world depends on how we define our relationship with God. Our task is simple yet very profound; we are to grow in the knowledge and purposes of God. As Christians, we must be responsible caretakers, managers and stewards of all God's gifts. One measure of how well we do at being responsible keepers is how well we do as givers for Christ's mission.

There is a story of a passenger ship that had an explosion in the engine room. It began taking on water it was sinking. As the survivors clamored into the lifeboats, along came one of the crew swimming toward a lifeboat that was already filled to capacity with survivors. When the crewman in charge reached out to pull him aboard, they began to sink. They had reached the maximum load limit and taking on one more would threaten the safety of everyone else. So, with regret, he let go of the man, letting him drift away and disappear from sight. In counting the number of survivors, the crewman in the boat first counted himself so that he wouldn't be the extra at the end of the count.

When we count ourselves first, we are always number one, every time. While it is quite natural to look out for ourselves, putting others ahead of ourselves is a mark of being a Christian. Placing the concerns of others ahead of ourselves is learned behavior. The natural thing is to count ourselves first because of the perceived notion that if we don't look out for ourselves, no one else will. One of the illusions of looking out for ourselves is to acquire enough money and material necessities to be secure and live comfortably. Long ago, a young newspaper reporter once asked the aged Standard Oil tycoon and philanthropist John D. Rockefeller how much money it takes to be happy. The old man thought about it for a moment and said, "It takes just a little more." There is something in our human nature that is never quite satisfied. We have a tendency to think that we need more than we have. The search never ends. Relationships based on what others can do for us don't satisfy us. Neither does status, titles and honors of any kind. One of the great dangers of acquiring things we think we need is to find ourselves owned and consumed by our possessions.

You may ask: What is wrong with self preservation? Isn't it better to take care of ourselves so that we won't be a burden to others? Let's go back to the story of the people in that lifeboat. They see the man swimming toward them and this time someone takes charge and hauls him in and exchanges places with him in the water while hanging onto the side of the boat. Beginning with himself, he organizes the others to work in half hour shifts getting into the water

and hanging on to the side of the boat. No one is turned away, no one is lost, and everyone is saved. In the first instance, the decision was made on the basis of safety of those inside the raft and in the second version the decision is based on their working in cooperation so that all could be saved. That is the difference between self-preservation and creative sacrifice.

For years I have heard people say that the church should take care of its own needs before getting involved in outreach. The plain and simple fact is that if we place a priority on own concerns, we never get beyond ourselves and our own needs. The simple fact is that the church that lives for itself will die by itself.

One of the things we learn in marriage is that the more we are considerate of our spouse's concerns the more our own needs are met. This is also as true in friendships, in business and in professional relationships. The more we are aware of others, the less we are concerned about ourselves.

The meaning of life is not found in what we acquire, nor in what we keep, nor in what we consume, but in what we give away. Responsible stewardship of our resources depends on how we use what we have. If we understand that all we have comes from God, then it becomes our need to share what we have for God's purposes. It all adds up to changing our attitude by changing the way we count. In the mathematics of the gospel, we reach out to those whom the rest of the world doesn't think are worth saving *because we count differently*.

We are soon going to be asked to support the work of Christ in this parish and beyond. Our stewardship of God's gifts is reflected in the way we manage our priorities. People are always more important than things. Stewardship is at the basis of all we are and all we do. As stewards of all the gifts of God, we share in the responsibility of what has been given us. To paraphrase what Jesus says in the gospel today, "Give to the state what belongs to the state and to God what belongs to God. We must be responsible stewards of our faith tradition, our mission and this place in which we gather to be sustained in our mission. We in this generation have the privilege and responsibility to pass on what we have been given to the next generation in worship, formation and outreach.

So, get ready to stand up and be counted. Be among those who are ready to make a commitment and pledge of the gifts of your time, your abilities and your money for the support of the work of Christ in this place and beyond. How much you should give is based upon giving a percentage of your income for God's work. Think in percentages.

It's time. It's time to stand up and be counted.