

The Rev. Ryan Fischer
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Sixth Sunday of Easter
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Lectionary Year B: John 15:9-17

For some of us, it may be easy to think back to a time in which our churches, communities, and service organizations could count on unquestioned and unwavering support. My parents, for example, were the kind of folks who would write out a check at a moment's notice when any number of fundraising types came around. And they were in no way unique among their generation and the preceding generation, the latter of which is often called the Greatest Generation. Naturally, many may look back longingly on those days and wish that our churches, communities, and service organizations had people with that level of commitment.

There is an obvious need for the succeeding generations to assume the duties and responsibilities of their elders, both in our churches and elsewhere. We're now looking for the involvement of the Millennials and Generation Z, but we're finding them to be less-than-inclined, for the most part, to offer their unquestioned and unwavering support. They're probably not going to write out checks at a moment's notice for this or that because, well, they don't write checks, period. I'm guessing that I'm one of the few of my generation (Generation X) who still carries a checkbook around regularly. Yet there must be some way to retain meaningful engagement with something beyond oneself and support it with one's time, talent, and treasure.

Furthermore, if we're finding that the Millennials and the Generation Z crowd don't have the disposable income to financially support institutions like ours (especially in comparison to their parents and grandparents), we might want to reconsider the kind of modeling of self-giving we've been doing. Getting back to my parents and their generation, they were able to write out those checks without much worry over where every last cent was going. It was wonderful for fundraisers to have people so trusting and eager, but we're not there anymore. Thus, it is incumbent upon the church to make giving an integral part of its catechesis.

Recalling my childhood, I remember my parents getting the full-size offering envelopes, while the Sunday School kids (like me) got miniature offering envelopes to put a couple of quarters in. The goal of this, of course, was to promote early on healthy habits of stewardship. That strategy, even in 1982, was a bit dated if you ask me, because my fellow Gen-Xers didn't exactly turn out to be the greatest philanthropists regardless of what they were taught in Sunday School!

Yet as we, as Episcopalians, are keenly oriented toward presentation and posture for ritual -- we stand, we kneel, we make the sign of the cross -- we have an opportunity to think about the ways in which we present and posture ourselves for all manners of self-offering -- time, talent, treasure...you name it! In the past, as was the case with the little Sunday School envelopes, the idea was to make the action automatic -- almost involuntary -- so as to say in our actions, "This is just what we do." Now-

days, this might have to be more intentional, thought-out, and deliberate. People need to see the rationale behind and explanation for the action in ways they didn't fifty years ago. It may be helpful, therefore, to show how time, talent, and treasure rest under the same umbrella. We are stewards of all that we have, and what we give back to God is all related regardless of the form or action it takes.

In our Gospel text, Jesus says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). In light of what I've just said, one can see love as a self-offering that gives not on the basis of another person's virtue, but in spite of another person's defects. Love is the means by which one can look beyond the imperfections and quirks of someone else and accept that person "as is." This does not mean, however, that you condone another person's dangerous or unlawful behavior should such concerns arise; there are surely loving ways to provide discipline and correction that aren't spiteful or cruel. On a more positive note, there may be good qualities about someone that make you love that person all the more, but what makes love unique is its endurance through both good and bad, virtue and defect, laudable and imperfect.

Love, therefore, can be expressed in the many and various ways we engage with our church. St. Augustine famously defined the church as a corpus permixtum, or "mixed body," indicating that it included both saints and sinners, believers and nonbelievers,

nice people and nasty people, and so on. There is no such thing as the "perfect church," and if your life's goal is to find the perfect church, you will go through life frustrated and unsatisfied, to say the least. But, you can still love the church like you love another person; in spite of its faults -- and not necessarily because of its virtues -- you can endure through the good and bad, the virtuous and defective, and the laudable and imperfect. Yes, we can love the church just as Christ loves the church. And who is the church? It is everyone who is baptized into the Lord's family -- that "mixed body" -- and who endures together through both hindrances and helps to its unity.

Your love of the church can be expressed in what you bring to it; certainly, you come here to worship God, but that can't be the only reason, and so you offer other sorts of things that you deem worthy because of what St. Anne's has offered to you. Perhaps you assist in the services, teach Christian Formation, participate in the music program, or place money in the offering plate. I'd like to (again) focus on the last of these, because of all the things on this list, money can be seen, in the church, as a necessary evil at best and dirty and unspiritual at the worst. The other things on the list don't have that stigma.

Money, much as we don't want to think about it as such, has a spiritual component insofar as it reveals our priorities and purposes before God. Back in the checkbook days, it was said that you could find out a lot about yourself by looking at your check register. Now, we can do the same with our credit card state-

ments, and, as an example, my credit card company provides handy pie graphs to show what I'm spending money on. For some reason, the "automotive" part of the pie graph takes up a lot of the pie for me! But anyone's analysis of where one's money goes needn't be so scientific; it can be a quick glance at the quarterly giving reports issued here at St. Anne's. Moreover, what you offer has less to do with what's financially feasible for you than with what you're willing to give. Big or small...all gifts matter!

And will St. Anne's ever be the perfect place deserving of your unquestioned and unwavering support? No! Actually, if you were looking for the "perfect" organization to support, you would support nothing. Again, this is a matter of how you express your love, and love does not allow itself to become mired in someone's or something's imperfections. In our Gospel text, Jesus says, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). Obviously, Jesus is referring to the life he offered in his crucifixion, which we cannot -- and dare not -- duplicate. But we can emulate his example of commitment. Yes, his love was so great that he died for those whom he loved, and the rest of us who cannot quite do that are simply asked to show a level of commitment that's a step beyond our ordinary commitments. As a church, St. Anne's can lead the way in providing that example for all of you. One thing I remember from 1982, besides the little offering envelopes in Sunday School, was that congregation's commitment to mission; there, the first item on the budget at the Annual Meeting was mission support, or "be-

nevolence," as they called it back then. First, they figured out what to give to the wider church and the community, then, they figured out how to pay for everything else...a great way for a congregation to model stewardship to its members!

And I know that diocesan assessments are regarded more as a "tax" than an "offering," but, they, too, are a form of mission support. A lot of the things that the Episcopal Church does as a whole are possible because of the money that we send to the diocese and the money that the diocese sends to the national church.

I bet you didn't think of your self-offering as a form of love when you came to church this morning, and you most certainly didn't think that money had anything to do with love, right?

Paul McCartney was correct in pointing out that "money can't buy you love," but money can reveal where one's loves are. In the church, we're called into a love that is unconditional and, therefore, our support of the church is not dependent upon what we get out of it. Were that the case, we'd be a service provider, not a church. You can't go to worship at one of your local service providers, either. That would just be weird...

And lastly, as we think about the future of the church, let us remember that our up-and-coming generations are very perceptive of the example we set. They want to not only see love preached but also see love lived. The way we live that love is evident, I believe, in what we offer to the church and in what the church offers to the world. To borrow Jesus' words, we also remember

that servants can become friends (John 15:15), and, similarly, that the "young folks" of the church become the adults of the church quicker than we think, so we both encourage and await their further involvement in this imperfect and yet faithful "mixed body."

Amen.