

A Sermon for the Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost 2014
St. James' Church, Mt. Airy MD
Blix Winston, Stewardship Committee Co-Chair

My beloved co-chair, Lucy, isn't here today. She's gone out to Ohio to help care for her brother Ray who is back in the hospital. Last Sunday Fr. Bill gave what I thought was the best stewardship sermon I've ever heard. If you missed it I encourage you to read it on our website. Bill's invitation to head up the Stewardship Committee prompted me to think, "could you please choose someone else? What sins have I committed to deserve this?" It reminded me a little of when I dug the hole out in front of the church for the cement base for the lighted sign. The ground was bedrock that only gave way bit by bit using an iron digging bar and we had a heat wave where it stayed at 95 degrees until 10:00 at night. I spent several days digging out that hole and one evening the neighbor across the street came up to me and asked, "Are you the pastor?" I was drenched in sweat and worn out and responded with "no, I'm the chief sinner...that's why I'm down in this hole".

Well, what do you think of this story of the three stewards? We've all heard it before and with many of Jesus' stories we often identify with one of the characters Jesus describes. In this story I don't think Jesus is talking about individuals however. It is told in the context of Jesus exposing how the religious rulers, the Sadducees and Pharisees, had misused the treasure entrusted to them by God. So we can see the talents in the story that were entrusted to the stewards as the riches of the Words of God, or to enlarge that, the Gospel.

The religious rulers had buried the good news under such a great pile of rules and regulations that it literally generated "little interest" in the people among whom the Jews lived. Now I use that term "little interest" in a double sense – few, outside of the nation of Israel, were interested

in converting though proselytizing did occur. But Jesus illustrates this phrase in the context of investing the one talent in the bank, the safest way to earn at least a little interest.

The Pharisees knew exactly what Jesus meant and it was stories like this that fueled their hatred of him. So what does this story of the three stewards have to say to us in our stewardship campaign?

You've heard Christians described as the New Jerusalem or the New Israel; what does that mean? I think it means something that relates directly to this morning's gospel story. To us has been entrusted the gospel, just as the good news of God's love for mankind was entrusted to ancient Israel. The richness of the gospel is unimaginably great.

Think about it – if you could sell the right to eternal life, you could charge any amount for it – Millions of dollars if you wanted and you'd have every rich person in the world lined up at your door. PPM sang about this, in a roundabout way, in the song All My Trials: “if religion were a thing that money could buy, the rich would live, and the poor would die”.

We have what the world needs - the stupendously great good news that the way to salvation and eternal life, forever separated from the pain, and sorrow, and grief, and injustice of the world, is available to all. At no cost. To us. It was paid for by the blood and death of Jesus.

What are we called to here at St. James? To worship God as a congregation....to serve all God's people...to grow in grace and love....and to bring more people into the family. No one is born a Christian - you don't become a literal child of God until God adopts you through his son Jesus Christ.

Well, wait a minute – haven't we gotten away from the subject of stewardship and planned giving to support St. James? Returning to the gospel story, if we're to be the kind of stewards commended by the Master when he returns, what we offer back....of what has been entrusted to

us...will come at the cost of some effort.....some risk taking....and some investment. See where this is going?

Investing a portion of our income – a tithe if you can – to keep the Church worshipping in this building is what we're asking you to prayerfully consider and then put on the giving plan form you'll be receiving in a few minutes. Is that connected to being good stewards of the rich gospel treasure entrusted to us? It is.

We need a place to worship together...this involves yearly expenses for the mortgage, for building maintenance, and for salaries.

We need a congregational base for our ministries...we can do more to serve others as a congregation than we can do alone.

And we need to do more than just earn interest. By interest I mean the kind of increase the master expects... from the rich treasure of the Gospel... he has entrusted to us. Perhaps there is where most of the risk lies – in taking in the Gospel; allowing it to transform us into ministers of God's Grace to the unchurched.

It means supporting those who are called to evangelism, both here in Mt. Airy, and around the world.

It means being willing to “prime the pump”. Do any of you remember those old country wells that had the cast iron pumps on top of them, the ones with the long handles? The one I remember had a container of water next to the pump which you had to pour into the top of it to get the washers in the pump to swell up and form a seal. It wouldn't draw water up if the washers were dry, so when you finished pumping the handle to get the water you needed, you had to leave some water in the container for the next time you wanted to use the pump.

Planned giving is a little like that old pump...it needed priming and then gushed forth abundantly. Jesus tells us “where your treasure is, there will your heart be also”. Will the Master say to us, “well done, good and profitable servants”? We can do this...we can lay hands on this most valuable of treasures and by priming the pump, bring forth abundant increase. Lord, increase our love for you and make us profitable stewards.