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St. James', Mt. Airy  
10/29/17

Pentecost 21/Proper 25A  
Deuteronomy 34:1-12  
Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17  
1 Thessalonians 2:1-8  
Matthew 22:34:46

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;  
take our hands and work through them;  
take our hearts and set them on fire.  
Amen.**

When I was in seminary in Cambridge, MA – before I did my parish internship, I was a member of a small but vibrant parish in nearly Arlington. It was so small that it only had a part-time priest-in-charge, not a rector. Size notwithstanding, it was an active, multi-generational community with lots of families with a focus on the arts.

On an average Sunday there were usually 50-60 people out of a membership of less than 100.

As you might imagine for a parish that size, even with only part-time clergy, making the budget each year was a challenge. One year their stewardship campaign came in about \$6,000 short of what they needed to fund a very bare-bones budget – the kind that basically keeps the doors open.

I don't know what conversations the leaders had that led them there, but the Sunday they announced the pledge total and the budget gap, they also offered this challenge to the congregation: Can you give up some of your coffee trips (there it was Dunkin's and Starbucks), and instead pledge that money to the church?

If you get fancy coffee 2-3 times a week, that's easily \$10 – which equals just over \$500 a year. At that rate they needed 12 pledgers to take up the challenge.

They had 20 pledgers do it, and were able to expand their budget in faithful and exciting ways that year.

I offer this story not because I'm asking you to give up your coffee trips, but because what I took away from being a member of that parish during that time was not only a dollars and cents understanding of how to look at my own priorities, but how the decision and choices we make are "a testing of our hearts" and a reflection of our relationship to God and each other.

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In our New Testaments scripture passages today there is a lot of testing going on.

In Matthew, the religious leaders once again ask Jesus a question to test him. Over the last several weeks we've read about a few of these interactions. It is worth remembering that in the chronology of Matthew, these stories come mere days before the crucifixion.

Scholar Kathryn Matthews describes these conversations as family arguments – but with higher stakes. And we can see this. While their dialogue is polite on the surface, you can feel the tension of relationships fraught with mistrust and "who's right" lurking just below.

And so, as Jesus and his friends moved closer to Passover, and the power-plays escalated, there was much testing. In this case, to see if Jesus could pass their test of orthodoxy, while trying to trap him in heresy. Instead Jesus hit this one out of the park

*“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”*

*“‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your souls, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”*

Jesus put together two laws about love – loving God (Deuteronomy 6:5) and loving neighbor (Leviticus 19:18) and gave it a twist in such a way as to confound those who tried to test him. Instead of reducing the importance of the rest of the laws, he painted a picture of them as a coherent whole that hangs together on love.

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The testing continues in today’s epistle: in the letter to the Thessalonians we are given the image of a God who tests our hearts.

I both love and am skeptical of this image.

On the one hand, I do not believe in a God who throws curve balls into our live to see how we react as a way of measuring us up.

When I was training to be a teacher I learned something that profound for me because I wished some of the teachers I had growing up had learned it too.

Tests and quizzes should never be used to punish. Students should never be surprised by a ‘pop quiz.’ Our job as educators was to give our students the opportunity to succeed, not trap them when they are unprepared.

God doesn't give pop quizzes. God does, however, teach us and give us the opportunity to test our own hearts to see what we've learned. Do the choices and decisions we make reflect that we love God and love our neighbors as ourselves? And how do we know if they do or not?

In order to be able to really answer that question we must remember that it all hangs on love – and that underlying that love is always relationship.

That's what the Great Commandment is really all about – relationships. Our relationship with God, our relationship with others, our relationship with our very selves – in which we connect our hearts, souls, and minds.

So, another way to ask this question would be, do my choices and decisions value my relationship with God? With my neighbors? With myself? If I only have so much time, talent, and treasure – where do I offer them?

That's where the coffee challenge fit in for me. It was a chance for me to examine my relationships – with the baristas at Starbucks who are very nice people, and the people I worshiped with—that I broke bread with, sang with, lived the Gospel with—and to make decisions accordingly based on what I valued.

It is a challenge that I revisit regularly as I slip into patterns of convenience rather than intentionality – re-turning to put God and community back in the center of my life when I let other things become more important than they really are.

When we make the effort to test our hearts in this way, it can change everything. We can turn away from the fear and constant need for more the world pedals, and live into the reality that all we need is already here.

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The idea of relationship is the unspoken foundation of our stewardship theme *Journey to Generosity*. When we say this, we are claiming our relationship with God as the source of all that we have – and challenge ourselves to live generously in all our relationships.

It is also a call to test our hearts. Not just about the money we spend or give – but about the heart, soul, and mind we give it with.

So test your heart. And consider something practical like coffee, or what you pay for internet at home, as you pray about what you will offer as pledge for 2018. And do it all because St. James' is a place where you've found, and continue to find, meaningful relationships with God and your neighbor.

And bring your pledge card next Sunday to offer in the offering plate – and to add a brick on our *Journey to Generosity* poster – to help us reach our goal for growing in God's love together in the coming year.

~ AMEN ~