

**Epiphany 1 B, St. Davids  
January 8, 2012 (Lead up to Consecration Sunday.)**

**Psalm 29, Genesis 1:1-5, Acts 19:1-7 Mark 1:4-11**

**God grant us the serenity to accept the things we can not change the courage to change the things we can and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other. Amen.**

Thomas Ellworth offers the following story entitled “Combination Prayer.” I needed some supplies from a Sunday school cupboard that was seldom used and was secured with a lock. I didn’t know the combination, but our clergyman offered to give it a try.

Father Jack placed his fingers on the lock’s dial and raised his eyes heavenward for a moment. Then he confidently spun the dial and opened the lock. Seeing how impressed I was with this demonstration of faith, he smiled and confided, “The numbers are written on the ceiling.”

Today’s gospel is full of faith as well as risk-taking. The Baptism of Jesus which begins the Gospel of Mark is recorded in all four gospels. Mark introduces John the Baptist who proclaims that his own service to God is to be the forerunner for a greater figure—to prepare the way for a ministry that would surpass his own. John was Jesus’ cousin but he was, to say the least, a bit odd, living in the desert near the Jordan River in

camel's hair clothing and eating locusts and honey. John, however, takes a huge risk by drawing attention to himself and by telling people that they need to repent. Can't you hear some people scoffing and laughing at him for using his gifts and talents and doing what God had asked of him. For John there is no holding back. He gives himself fully into God's service. That is a huge risk, and we know from the other gospels, that John's insistence on repentance cost him his life when Herod beheads him.

Likewise, Jesus gives all that he has to do "His Father's work." Some have questioned why Jesus would need to be baptized as he had no guilt to wash away. But our Lord comes to John and is baptized in the Jordan. By this baptism Jesus identifies himself with the spiritual needs of humanity and is empowered by the Holy Spirit. And we know that after three short years of ministry, Jesus risks it all to give his life on the cross so that our relationship with God might be restored and believers inherit eternal life.

So this gospel, it seems to me, is asking us not to play it safe and hoard our time, talent and treasure or to be like Scrooge and only give a tiny bit. God's call, which is to be followed in whatever ways we are gifted to do so, demands that we take the risks that must accompany growth.

Rather than just living safely, we are to act in ways that reflect the creativity and commitment of our Creator. For even God takes the risk of reaching out to us in love in the giving of God's beloved Son Jesus.

Thus waiting and watching for the final coming of the Kingdom of God demands that we choose risk over security. We are to be good stewards of the Gospel by proclaiming the Good News and not by hiding it away. The reward is the everlasting joy of our Lord. In God's eyes it is necessary for us to give to deepen our own spiritual journey. Another way of saying that might be when we give to God's work, we are saying that we have a vision for what God can do with that gift of time, talent and treasure. And what God can do with us because we gave that time, talent, and treasure.

As I said in my recent letter to you, hopefully you are aware that next Sunday, Jan. 15<sup>th</sup> is Consecration Sunday. Bishop Barker will be with us as our Consecration Sunday speaker. As we prepare for that important spiritual decision, each of us will be reflecting on the question, 'What is God calling me to give as a percentage of my income?' Notice that income might not be just money but time and talent as well. "What is God calling me to give as a percentage of my income?' That is a personal, spiritual question, and three kinds of people answer it in three different ways

according to Herb Miller.

Some people answer it by saying, 'I feel God is calling me to give 10 percent of my income to the Lord's work. I have been thinking about tithing for several years, and I want to begin that spiritual journey this year.'

Another kind of person responds to the question like this: 'Eventually I want to begin tithing, but I am not ready to do that this year. I feel God is calling me to start somewhere—to drive my tent pegs in the ground at 5 percent or 6 percent or 4 percent—knowing that God will bless that decision by helping me to increase my giving in coming years.'

A third kind of person has been tithing for many years. For example some have said in the past when they were just getting started, 'We'll tithe now; later we'll do more.' The years rolled by and now they say, "Wow, do we ever have more! So much more that ten percent does not even come close to a sacrifice for us. We feel God is calling us to give 15 percent or 20 percent of our income to the Lord's work. Forbes magazine in 1997 told a story about Hugh and Nancy McFarland Jr. who began giving away 70% of their income when Hugh was thirty-nine. Should their pastor limit stewardship for them to a ten percent concept? Probably not.

My husband, Tom and I began to work towards tithing in 1990 in

gratefulness to God for sparing my life from cancer. We reached our goal just as I entered seminary. In the intervening twenty plus years, we were all three types of the people above. And since his death I have continued to tithe. It never ceases to amaze me how giving more has always resulted in receiving incredible gifts. God's economy is truly different from ours. If that were a one-time or a one person only happening, we could chalk it up to coincidence. But the more we give, the more we receive. That has not only been my experience but everyone that I have talked with who is tithing reports the same amazing abundance. It's as if in tithing, we are living what Jesus says, "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance."

As we prepare for Consecration Sunday, our annual stewardship Sunday, I know each of us will be praying for God's guidance as we prepare to answer the spiritual question, "What percentage of my income is God calling me to give?"

Listen to what Laurie Foster from Lubbock, Texas says. "A few years ago, I was visiting with a mother in our church foyer between Sunday school and the worship hour.

Josh who was about three years old, came around the corner with a

donut in his hand. Annette looked at him in surprise and asked, 'Where did you get the money for that?' Because at that church during the fellowship hour, people put in a quarter to cover the cost of donuts.

Josh said, 'I saved it from the offering.'

Foster goes on to say, "A lot of people operate out of that mind set. How often do we save money from the offering plate to buy something for ourselves because we're afraid we won't have what we need? That behavior is funny in a three year old, but sobering to think about when adults do the same thing. All through the Bible, God's principle is 'give to receive.' That contrasts with our American thought pattern of 'gather and keep for ourselves.' Which belief do we follow?

In Malachi 3:8-10 God says, ' Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, How do we rob you? In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this, says the Lord Almighty, and see if I will not throw open the flood gates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.'

Foster continues, The Bible is full of scriptures like this. Because of

those promises in God's word, I can give freely and joyfully, trusting that God will give me what I need. I want God in control of my finances. After all, everything I have came from Him in the first place. Yet I wonder how many times we have saved our money from the offering to buy a donut, when our Heavenly Father wanted to give us steak? You don't have to believe that Scripture. You can keep your money and talents. God will keep His hands off and let you control it all. But as for me, I want the God of miracles in control of my finances. I want the God who fed 5,000 people with three fish to be in control of my money.

When was the last time you talked to a homeless person who said, "Well, I was doing fine until I started that tithing business. God is a loving Father we can trust. People who say, 'I just can't afford to tithe,' approach the subject of giving a tithe as if it were a sacrifice instead of a blessing.

"I can't afford not to tithe is a more accurate statement of what happens when we put God first. Many times, tithing is the only reason I made it through the month."

Foster concludes, "Trust God to be who He says He is."

Some have said that stewardship is what I do with all that I have once I say I believe. I urge you to spend some prayer time this week and ask

God what you are to give in 2012. Perhaps if we risk a bit more and freely give our ourselves fully using our time, talent and treasure to further the kingdom of God, we may hear God say to us, "You are my beloved in whom I am well pleased."

**In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**