

An excerpt reading from the Book of Nehemiah (10:32): "We assume the responsibility for carrying out the commands to give a third of a shekel each year for the service of the house of our God: for the bread set out on the table; for the regular grain offerings and burnt offerings; for the offerings on the Sabbaths, New Moon festivals and appointed feasts; for the holy offerings; for sin offerings to make atonement for Israel; and for all the duties of the house of our God. We-the priests, the Levites, and the people-have cast lots to determine when each of our families is to bring to the house of our God at set times each year a contribution of wood to burn on the altar of the Lord our God, as it is written in the Law. We also assume responsibility for bringing to the house of the Lord each year of the first fruits of our crops and of every fruit tree. As it is also written in the Law, we will bring the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, of our herds and of our flocks to the house of our God, to the priests for ministering there. "

"Moreover, we will bring to the storerooms of the house of our God, to the priests, the first of our ground meal, of our grain offerings, of the fruit of all our trees and of our new wine and oil. And we will bring a tithe of our crops to the Levites, for it is the Levites who collect the tithes in all the towns where we work. A priest descended from Aaron is to accompany the Levites when they receive the tithes, and the Levites are to bring a tenth of the tithes up to the house of our God, to the storerooms of the treasury. The people of Israel, including the Levites, are to bring their contributions of grain, new wine, and oil to the storerooms where the articles of the sanctuary are kept and where the ministering priests, the gatekeepers and the singers stay. We will not neglect the house of our God."

Had the St. James congregation been present for the decrees enshrined in the Book of Nehemiah, could you imagine how our beloved altar, and Snyder Hall might have appeared as we faithfully brought our grain, crops, wood, first born cattle, and first born children to Father Wayne? The sights and smells embodied in that command may well have augured a fair bit of discomfort in the way of unsanitary conditions, despite our well meaning attempts to provision God's house. However, implicit in Nehemiah's decrees was an acknowledgment that those ordained clergy (the Levites) required a dedicated means of support for maintaining God's physical presence among the people (the altar and living quarters for the Levitical priests) as well as a place to congregate for offering to God praise, and thanksgiving. The voluntary surrendering of these things of significant value to God's ministers and priests was 1) in thanksgiving for that bounty which God had bestowed upon his people; He does extravagantly provide; and, 2) a realization among the faithful that God's hands, feet, and eyes in this world are us. God provided for His priests and ministers to accomplish His work on earth through our efforts to cheerfully surrender the finest of our yield to Him, to concomitantly acknowledge that His glory is infinite, and that His mercy endures forever. God also teaches us that the best things in life aren't things.

We embark upon this season of Ingathering, consistently marked by the implementation of the annual Fall Stewardship campaign. You previously read my reference to the notion of stewardship as a holistic and well intentioned effort to care for (in this instance) The Church, and The Church's mission here on earth; The Church is us. The Biblical excerpt from the Book of Nehemiah underscores the precept that God expected a reciprocating generosity, in return for His generosity. And, that the poor, the church, and the ministers of His church, also have existential needs which must be met, in order for the visitation of the Holy Spirit to meaningfully dwell among us. God meets (and often exceeds) ours.

These needs are met through consistent pledging, or (a more apt description of your generosity) Stewardship; a cheerful giving over of those things of value to sustain and to grow The Church. Implicit in this pledge is an acknowledgment that we are vibrantly connected to this parish of Saint James, that we believe in the mission of Saint James, and an affirmation of our Christian identity within the greater worldwide Anglican Communion. Our gifts (time, talent, and treasure) maintain our sanctuary; our gifts also alleviate suffering among those we may, or do not know. The Lord smiles upon us when we share our strength.

Father Cork Tarplee (now deceased) of St. Stephen's, Millburn, was a mentor to me. For many years, the implementation of the annual Ingathering Campaign was always "subcontracted" to a dedicated group of enthusiastic parishioners (of which I was one) because of his preference for avoiding the subject of asking the parish for money. Time and talent, he didn't mind, but in charging us with this joyful (and essential) burden, he explained his logic by saying "I cannot be these folks' shepherd, and ask them for money also." As insightful and capable a pastor as he was, he was sensitized to the seeming appearance of a perceived "transactional relationship." On occasion, and even within the church, discussions about money harbor the potential to become contentious among a select few who ascribe to money a more exalted niche in their personal hierarchy of needs than it should occupy. He also realized that while seeking alms was a component of historical, and contemporary ministry, he had the luxury of relying upon parish peers to speak for him. And, as typically happened, after the pledges had been gathered around the Thanksgiving holiday, he was tasked with making a round of calls to an approximate dozen parishioners who had either forgotten to submit a pledge card, were reluctant to pledge, or just wanted to feel like they were getting singular attention from the rector. He didn't mind making these last calls.

One of my first monthly assignments as a journeyman special agent in New York was to guard, and safely convey, shipments of seized narcotics and worn out Federal Reserve Notes to an incinerator in Lower Manhattan, which was adjacent to the Staten Island Ferry landing under the FDR Drive; that's where tattered money from the metropolitan area went to die. I did this once a month for the first three years of my career. If you've wondered what happened to worn bills that could no longer circulate, now you know. They were burned, along with seized narcotics, and other contraband.

Prior to the invention of paper money, goods and services were exchanged through bartering, or exchanging precious commodities such as salt, cattle, or grains (Nehemiah). The Massachusetts Bay Colony was alleged to have issued the first iteration of paper money in the United States on February 3rd, 1690 as a convenient means of exchange for funding hostilities against Canada during what was known as "King William's War." Paper money represented a bill of credit, or a valid IOU, and surely was a lot more universally convenient than maintaining facilities for the storage of cattle and grains, or bringing seven head of cattle to church as an offering.

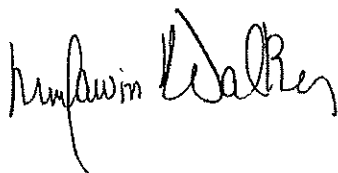
Why Pledge?

Why not pledge? We faithful dedicate, or pledge a portion of our income to the church through tithing, or proportional giving, because we believe in the mission of the church, and we want to be a part of that mission. Submitting a pledge card is not an ironclad "contract" that you "owe" the church money. Submitting a pledge card is an affirmation of your faith, and (more significantly) an expression of gratitude to the Lord. The alms collected by the church in her formative years were initially distributed by the priests, for the feeding and caring of widows and orphans, until that responsibility exceeded their primary role of ministering God's Word to the faithful. With a recognition that charity to those on the margins was essential (Jesus said: "The poor, you will always have with you") the priests initially identified, and appointed an original seven deacons (one who waits/one who serves) whose primary responsibility was to distribute the collected alms to the poor, the widowed, and the orphaned with the implicit understanding that the word of the Lord could not be received, understood, and digested on an empty stomach. The ministers of the church fed the body, to feed the soul, as did Jesus.

We remember Jesus' parable of the wealthy landowner who promised himself that he'd build more expansive barns and grain siloes because his crop yield was magnificent. Those around him in severe need were invisible (to him), and his self-gratifying strategy of storing up treasures for himself here on earth precluded him from acknowledging a verity: when you go, you can't take it with you. There are two things in this world that you'll never see (and if you do, please let me know): a coffin with pockets, and a Brink's truck behind a hearse. We do good while we are here, as God provides the opportunities. Our responsibility as faithful Episcopalians is to seize them.

This is surely not a denunciation of the amassing of wealth. There's nothing wrong with doing good, and living well, as one prospers. There is something wrong with, not in gratitude, acknowledging the supreme source of that largesse; all good things emanate from the Father. As Saint James says: "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed, "but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."

As we begin another year together at Saint James, let us give thanks for each other, thanks for this vibrant community of faith, and thanks for the extravagant love of the Holy Trinity. Please be thoughtful in filling out the Stewardship pledge card for 2023.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Marvin Walker, Jr.", with a stylized, cursive script.

Marvin Walker, Jr. Warden

Stewardship Chair