



St. James' Episcopal Church
Diocese of Newark
Hackettstown, New Jersey
Stewardship Sunday Sermon
October 11, 2015
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Good Morning! It's a pleasure to be in front of you again to talk about Stewardship, a pleasure I last had 12 years ago. Before that last sermon on Stewardship, I was lucky to have Father Wayne Riley ask me to preach four times here. In one of those sermons I addressed the architectural style of St. James just before the Vestry chose to restore it to its Victorian Gothic Revival traditions. I still see and enjoy those changes today which include the wooden beams above us, now painted brown to emphasize the soaring nature of what was designed to be a little cathedral in wood. With the hope that this sermon will give a new color to Stewardship, I'd like to turn again to the history St. James' parish and its traditions this morning.

If there's one way to describe this parish and its history, I think it's a quote from Benjamin Disraeli: "The secret to success is constancy of purpose." Constancy is defined as "the quality of being unchanging or unwavering, as in purpose, love, or loyalty; firmness of mind; faithfulness." This parish and its little church has been unwavering in its effort to bring God's word to Hackettstown and the surrounding communities using the Episcopal Church's reliance on scripture, tradition and reason.

St. James' history for most of its first hundred years is detailed in a wonderful book, long out of print but available for reading at the Historical Society. *The Story of Hackettstown New Jersey, 1754-1955* by J. Harold Nunn tells us that our parish was organized on December 19, 1858. "The prospects were very encouraging and warranted the organization. A very eligible plot of ground, on Washington Street at the corner of Moore street, had already been secured, and a subscription begun for funds to erect a building."

Let's face it, there's no greater bet on the future, no greater act of stewardship and no better demonstration of constancy of purpose than to build a church and parish from scratch. Nothing makes this clearer than the fact that the United States was just coming out of a major economic recession in December of 1858. But in less than four months, the cornerstone out front was laid and the church building commenced. It was not without setbacks. That summer, a tornado struck town and destroyed the framing and the tower. It was all rebuilt and the church was dedicated that year.

Thereafter, despite the Civil War, several recessions, the Panic of 1873 and what's known as the Long Depression, the church continued. Through a constancy of purpose, the members of this church maintained building and parish without knowing what the future would bring. They prayed for God's grace with these words from the last Standard Edition of the 1789 Book of Common Prayer:

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, from whom cometh every good and perfect gift; Send down upon our Bishops, and other Clergy, and upon the Congregations committed to their charge, the healthful Spirit of thy grace; and, that they may truly please thee, pour upon them the continual dew of thy blessing.

Yet it was never easy. The church's second vicar quit because he wasn't being paid. The third vicar couldn't live on what he was paid so he erected a Parish Hall and started a private elementary school to supplement his pay. Yet the church held on until it was down to 12 communicants. Imagine the sadness and pain when in 1887 the parish was unable to meet the financial burden of maintaining this church. Nunn implies this was attributable to the decline of Schooley's Mountain as a summer resort. Perhaps the wealthy Episcopalians who summered at the hotels and spas up Mountain Avenue and who attended Episcopal summer services at St. James or in the hotels themselves stopped giving generous gifts of the type given by wealthy hotel guests to Bethesda Episcopal Church in Saratoga Springs, New York. More likely it was caused by the "dwindling congregation." Whatever the cause, the church was sold, probably after a service of deconsecration and secularization. If that service was similar to the service used today, it acknowledged that, for many years, the building had been "hallowed by cherished memories" and prayers were offered that those who suffered a sense of loss would be comforted through the knowledge that God's presence was not tied to any place or building.

Even with such a service, think of the embarrassment, the loss and the desperation experienced by parishioners when what had been their church became a theater and music hall. Yet they persevered and through constancy of purpose, St. James' parish church services resumed in 1895. They were held behind the theater in what had been the Parish Hall. In 1896, Father William Mitchum became the full-time Vicar. Within three years, on the 40th anniversary of St. James Church - again showing a constancy of purpose - the parish raised the money necessary to buy back its church and parish hall. Nunn says "On Sunday, November 18, 1896, for the first time in 12 years, the bell in St. James church tolled out the invitation to divine service." I like that phrase, "divine service." It has so many meanings, one of which is stewardship.

On April 30, 1900, St. James church was "restored and purified." A newspaper account reported on that day. "With the sincere good wishes and hearty congratulations of a score of visiting priests and a large congregation, St. James Episcopal Church was restored to its place among the churches of the diocese. The day and season were all that could be desired [when the bishop] stepped out ... to welcome the procession of ministers [and] looked down into as many happy faces as perhaps were ever gathered in the little church." As an aside, the text that morning was from Luke: "And he went into the temple and began to cast out them that sold therein and those that bought, saying unto them: 'It is written, my house is the house of prayer, but ye have made it a den of thieves.'" So much for the reputation of theater managers. In any event, there aren't many changes left from the theater days, except the addition of the balcony.

Father Mitchum was here until 1927. In those years, he was instrumental in the construction of Lady Chapel and what we call today the Mitchum House, the installation of chimes in the belfry, and the rebuilding and enlargement of the Parish hall. All those were financed by the church, another proof of St. James' constancy of purpose. Yet it was not all

happiness and light. Witness this window to your left that memorializes the Mitchums' loss of a child.

We are the spiritual heirs to the founders of St. James. We are the spiritual heirs to the congregants who had their church sold. We are the spiritual heirs of Father William Mitchum and those priests and congregants who followed. And being their heirs, we have a responsibility to both them and those who follow us. We must be constant of purpose and that purpose must include the preservation and improvement of what we have, so that it can be passed on to future generations of congregants. Note I said improvement. A church and its congregation are not meant to be put in a metaphorical jar and pickled. That's not preservation. That's not stewardship. That's to be placed on a shelf and forgotten.

What is stewardship? It comes from the Greek word oikonomos [oy-kon-om'-os] that means not the owner of the house but the person to whom the owner delegates the responsibility to manage it and its expenses. Stewardship is not just giving money to a church, for that turns the concept upside down. It's God who gives us our time, talent and treasure and, as stewards, we manage it and use it in ways that we know, through God's grace, will please God. In this way, we give our time, talent and treasure back to God so that our work with God's gifts will endure and prosper beyond our lifetimes. As the Psalm read today says:

So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom ...
Show your servants your works and your splendor to their children.
May the graciousness of the LORD our God be upon us;
prosper the work of our hands; prosper our handiwork.

Stewardship is the physical proof of constancy of purpose. Look at us. We've survived the worst recession since the 1930's. We've dealt with a lot of difficult issues and yet here we are. We're not broke. In fact, I'm told we're sustaining ourselves. We have a terrific interim priest who will leave us in a position to grow and prosper. I know I feel a new enthusiasm in us. From 1857 to today, we've dealt with challenges and come back stronger. Our constancy of purpose has been, with God's help, the key to our survival and success. And we're not done yet - as faithful stewards, we can expect today and in the future an abundant and full life in St. James Parish.

So, prayerfully and carefully consider the blessings of time, talent and treasure God has given you. Then freely return a portion of them to St. James as God leads you.