

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

October 16, 2016

Stewardship I, Luke 21:1-4

Friends, together, let us remember and reaffirm our baptismal promises:

Will you live generously, stewarding our gifts and resources in support of the Church and the well-being of all creation?

We will, with God's help.

Will you persevere in resisting temptation, seeking one another's forgiveness and God's?

We will, with God's help.

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

We will, with God's help.

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

We will, with God's help.

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as God loves us?

We will, with God's help.

[and, finally] Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being?

We will, with God's help.

Then, in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Today begins our annual Stewardship season, and, for this year's theme, we have chosen, "Living A Life Of Promise"...*Living A Life Of Promise*. Each Sunday, we will focus on one of the promises comprising our baptismal covenant – those commitments we just reaffirmed – and each Sunday's scriptural lessons will express that day's particular theme. Our season will crescendo on November 20, when we will celebrate the nearing completion of the church with the setting of its cornerstone, a foundation including a time capsule: a cloth scroll signed by all of us committing ourselves to 2017 and the next generation of Good Shepherd's ministry...exciting stuff by any measure.

Two months ago when we firmed these plans for our theme and its attendant programming, we identified today's appointment from Luke – "The Widow's Mite" – to accompany this first promise, namely, that we will "live generously, stewarding our gifts and resources in support of the Church and the well-being of all creation." In our planning, I committed to preach today on what I called then "The Rise of the False Victim"...*The Rise of the False Victim*...and I intended to consider how we people of means present ourselves as heroes for sacrifices that, at the end of the day, do not cut as deep or carry the consequence we claim of them. In so doing, we claim a false victimhood, seeking affirmation for only partial truths. This was to be a difficult message, but a truthful and, hopefully, powerful one. I was ready for it.

What I did not expect during our August planning, was that the day this week I would open my laptop to begin writing this sermon text, the front page of CNN's website would be headlined by the quote of a presidential nominee – “I Am A Victim” – above a full-screen photo of the candidate at a microphone.

I take seriously the call to keep partisanship out of this pulpit, and you need not fear that I will break that commitment now. I believe I have been called to love and pastor this *entire* congregation, and not simply to affirm those who vote as I might. Moreover, and *at least* as importantly, I believe we maintain our fitness for the Kingdom of Heaven by continuing to grow and to be challenged *all* the years of our lives, and, I have no interest whatsoever in shepherding a congregation of monochromatic households who have already decided they've resolved all life's mysteries. Thanks be to God, Good Shepherd includes faithful men and faithful women and faithful families of every political persuasion, and I pray that we will nurture that diversity and not offend it.

I also take seriously the responsibility to prevent our sanctuary from becoming a *bubble*: an insular space absent any meaningful acknowledgement of the world in which we live. For as you have heard me say so many times, the faith we have inherited, we receive as a gift...never for ourselves only, but always for the benefit of the world. I admire the historic Church's courage – in the model of Jesus who spoke truth to the powerful – to make a righteous stand when called. We, as well, inherit that weighty responsibility, not on behalf of any political party – hear that again: *not on behalf of any political party* – but on behalf of humankind.

Navigating this tension, I therefore return to this week's headline, and I say to you, that one who attempts to leverage for his own political gain the sexual misbehaviors of his opponent's spouse, cannot then cast himself as a victim when his own misbehaviors become a focus of attention. Further, one who so blithely brags about sexual assault cannot cast himself as a victim when women come forward confirming his claims. Indeed, one who declines to defend his own daughter when facing the peer pressure of a vulgar disc jockey cannot blame the media when the nation declines to elect him to defend their own families. He is not a victim, he is a *false* victim, a celebrity seeking to gain both the admiration *and* shared indignation of the voters he courts, all while risking *nothing* his throne.

And he is not alone, for one who repeatedly prevaricates when answering questions about her digital communications cannot cast herself as a victim when prospective voters question her trustworthiness. Further, one who accepts millions of dollars for speaking to banking industry elites, cannot cast herself as a victim when editorial boards wonder if she is beholden to “Wall Street,” so-called. Indeed, one cannot feign outrage when her opponent questions her credibility as an agent of change in light of her lengthy, legislative track record. She is not a victim, she is a *false* victim, a politician seeking to improve her standing, rather than risk that position for any greater good.

Throwing such stones is easy, but that satisfaction is cheap. More demanding and *far more important* is the task of discerning our complicity – *our complicity* – in these politicians' rise and the character of the campaigns they have led. See, we cannot cast *ourselves* as victims of these candidates, when we tacitly or actively condone their same bigotries and

condescensions. No, we cannot cast ourselves as victims of propriety's absence from our national dialogue when *we* pushed for that permission by supporting the polemics of television and radio ideologues. Likewise, neither Donald Trump nor Hillary Clinton removed the moral disqualifiers for service as President of these United States: if any have, then *we have...* by our hard-lined, self-interest, *we* have made this mess, and now, *we* – “*We, the People,*” and *we, the Church* – must decide what we are willing to risk and to sacrifice for the sake of ascending a higher road...and **there remains a higher road!**

Over the years, I have shared with you many reasons – theologically sound, authentic rationales – for my family and I making a priority of our financial commitment to Good Shepherd. Those rationales still stand, and as this year's campaigns have unvarnished our votes, so, too, has this electoral season unvarnished my support of the Church: **I have never been more eager, never felt more grateful for the privilege to make my pledge than I am right now:** to give my heart...to give my soul...to give my *all* to this endeavor of the Holy Spirit, this institution that Christ founded. By my pledge, I pray that I resist the pressure to find satisfactory excuses to absolve my responsibility for the way of things these days, and, instead, I commit myself to pursue faithful and effective *solutions*: other ways... *better* ways.

By my pledge, I claim my share in our recent class about “being mortal,” which was not a polarizing debate about healthcare, but an honest discussion of life's meaning.

By my pledge, I claim my share in the acknowledgement and nurture of the teenagers celebrating their Rite 13 today, not as a curmudgeon's complaint about youth culture, but as a partner in charting for them a responsible journey to adulthood.

By my pledge, I claim my share in “Costumes for a Cause” Halloween swap, not as a transactional handout, but as an invitation for everyone to give and receive, playfully engaging a special occasion *together*.

By these modest gestures, God continues to choose the Church as an alternative to the market politic of the moment, the cultural force of any given season in our common life. By our commitments, **God continues to choose the Church** for sharing ideas grander than fleeting memes, for narrating stories with horizons further back than this empire, and more distantly before us than our most glorious hopes can imagine. So, when I despair – when I want to scream at the TV or cry in my pillow – I give thanks to God for the Church. I give thanks to God for that imperfect, holy collection of souls who truly sacrificed – widow and wealthy, alike – who sought the higher road and made possible this sanctuary, which *is* one of honesty and vulnerability, and *not* of willful ignorance or avoidance.

I give thanks for all those *who continue* to pursue Grace before Judgment – Love before ugliness – **and I invite you to join those good shepherds**, restoring integrity and dignity to ourselves and every human being. For to live a life of promise is to live a life of *this* hope, *living generously, stewarding our gifts and resources* – all that we are, and all that we have – *in support of the Church and the well-being of all creation*.

In the name of God,
Amen.