



WHEN IS ENOUGH, ENOUGH?

Sermon Preached by The Rev. Robert H. Fernández on October 11, 2009

Exodus 25:1-9, 36:2-7 ♦ Psalm 103:1-5, 22 ♦ 2 Corinthians 9:6-9 ♦ Mark 10:17-31

This is one of those times when what I want to say with accuracy has to be said in Spanish. That is one of the frustrations of being bi-lingual. Ordinarily, when I am with a bi-lingual group of people, I flow from one language to the other, and everybody can follow, but that is not the case here. Therefore, after I say it in Spanish, I will expand in English as clearly as I can. Here is the Spanish saying: “No hay mal que por bien no venga.” Roughly speaking that means, “There is no ill that comes without a benefit.” The deepest meaning of this saying, however, is this: If we look intently and deeply at the ill or into the bad situation we are experiencing, we are given the opportunity to see what really matters—what is truly important—so that we gain a better perspective on life—a clearer view of the larger picture. Such a perspective draws our attention away from the doom and gloom so that we can focus on the reality that needs our fullest attention. In this way we can emerge from the situation as William Ernest Henley said “Bloody but unbowed.” Let us be clear. This is not a “Polly Ana” outlook that says casually that everything is going to be all right. It is a taking a long loving look at the real so that priorities can be established and the right perspective can be understood.

This particular saying and its significance brings speaks incisively to the current world financial crisis, especially as it pertains to this country. Many are being swept away by a torrent of loss after riding high on a wave of intoxicating prosperity and at times reckless speculation. We can be overwhelmed by the circumstances, which in many cases are dire, but, on the other hand, we are given the opportunity to concentrate on what really matters—the essentials—so that our lives can move forward. We are called to build our lives upon those elements that will provide abundant and fruitful life.

It does not surprise me, therefore, that this takes us right to the heart of what Christian stewardship of life means. The important question we face is: How do we live our lives in times like these? These times of financial crisis give us the opportunity to structure our entire way of living so that how we spend our money reflects our sense of responsibility, and how we live each day at home, at work, at school, at church, at play—in all aspects—reflects what is most essential to have a quality of life that is balanced and whole. In short, it is a most exciting opportunity that should be embraced gladly.

Our Scripture passages draw our attention in this direction. At this point, I am sure that many of you are aware that I, who am a rather strict follower of the common lectionary readings of Scripture from which to preach, have deviated from three of the four readings for today. The gospel reading is the only one that remains in the prescribed scheme. So, what is going on? I will give two reasons for my departure from the prescribed lessons. One is that during Ordinary Time in the Christian year—we are now on the 28th Sunday of Ordinary Time—preachers are given some opportunity to preach from other texts. That gets me off the hook; right? More importantly, however, it is the beginning of our Stewardship Emphasis for 2009, and I wanted us to begin our pilgrimage on the note sounded by these passages. So, let’s begin.

Our passage from Exodus finds the Hebrew nation wandering in the wilderness of Sinai as nomads who had recently been slaves in Egypt—constantly on the go with very little of permanence. It was a wandering that would last forty years before they settled with any permanence. As such they were forced to concentrate on the essentials of living. Life in the deserts of the Middle East is no Shangri La, and I imagine that there was little opportunity for luxury much less extravagance. It is quite surprising, therefore, to see that the first thing of any permanence they were asked to build was their center of worship—the Tabernacle, the sanctuary that signified the presence of God in their midst. And even then, the Tabernacle was so constructed that it could be quickly dismantled, folded, and carried to the next stop in the wandering journey. It is plain to see that one of the most important elements in their manner of life was acknowledging the presence of God in their lives.

Therefore, Moses was told to request that the people bring from their possessions the offerings with which to build the Tabernacle. We read, “Tell the Israelites to take for me an offering; from all whose hearts prompt them to give you shall receive the offering for me.” An extremely important factor is the prompting of the heart that draws forth the gift. We will return to that prompting of the heart later. There was to be no requisite or mandatory amount demanded from any person. They were to give as they were moved in their hearts. Furthermore, keep in mind that these people had been slaves in Egypt. As such they had little or nothing except what they had obtained from the few Egyptian benefactors, and now they were being transformed from slaves into willing givers of what they did possess. The people then began evaluating their way of life and their possessions to determine what their hearts prompted them to give so that the Tabernacle could be built that they may acknowledge the presence of God in their midst. They brought gold, silver, bronze, yarn, etc. And the craftsmen began the construction.

An amazing thing happened as construction progressed. The people brought more than enough gifts. The craftsmen informed Moses to tell the people to stop bringing gifts. Can you imagine such a thing? Whatever faults the Israelites may have had, and there were plenty, in this instance, they demonstrated their capability to examine their total way of life so that from what they did possess, they were able to provide more than enough—so that there was a balance between what they kept for themselves and what they gave. So, when is enough, enough? When there is a balance between giving a portion that honors God the Creator and a portion of what honors one’s self.

GOSPEL STORY

We turn the pages of time from the Exodus to the story of the man who came to Jesus asking: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” It is a well-known story. This man was a very devout Jew who observed all the commandments meticulously. Yet, there seemed to be an emptiness within him—an uneasiness. Jesus helped him rehearse all the typical ways of living a righteous life just to make sure it was all understood. When it became clear that all the prescriptions for inheriting eternal life had been met, Jesus took him by surprise. What really matters, Jesus pointed out, is what fills your life. Or better yet, of what substance is your life made? This man’s life was made of riches, of possessions, of things. Jesus asked him if were willing to replace those things with something of more substance—of caring for the disadvantaged and the outcast and seeing that there is enough for everyone. Unfortunately, he passed up this opportunity and went away sad.

Immediately following this story Peter, that loudmouthed disciple said: “Look we have left everything and followed you.” I am not quite sure if he was boasting or complaining. I think his statement had a great deal of both because of the way Jesus responded to him. In effect Jesus said, “Don’t be obsessed with worry, Peter. Live your life in service to God’s way, and you will find a balance in your life now and in the life to come.” And most startling of all, Jesus said, “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.” To follow Jesus has a way of turning things up-side-down according to the popular standards. And in yet another place Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be.” We connect with the passage from Exodus! When is enough, enough? When giving comes from the heart.

THE CENTRALITY OF GOD IN OUR LIVES

As we begin our stewardship season this year, let us keep the story of constructing the first Tabernacle in mind. One of essential elements of life, if not **the most essential**, is acknowledging the centrality of God in our lives. In all that we are and in all that we do, we are to have God, the Source of existence, at the center.

The way of Jesus Christ requires that our lives stem from this core focused on God—the source of our being. This determines

- How we use our time.
- What we do with our lives, our abilities, our minds.
- How we relate to other people.
- How we take care of ourselves.
- How we care for the world in which we live.
- How and what of the goods available we consume.
- What we give of our substance for the well-being of God’s ministry through the church and through the countless worthwhile charities known to us.

CHEERFULNESS

The passage from 2 Corinthians assists us in understanding yet another factor of stewardship. We read: “The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” As we begin our stewardship season, let our consideration of how we are to express our stewardship be determined with cheerfulness. It is the cheerful heart that determines when enough is enough.

REPLACING “STUFF” WITH SUBSTANCE

There are many problems facing our world today: poverty, environmental pollution, world famines, world plagues, nuclear terrorism, loss of biodiversity, deforestation, global warming, global cooling, economic crashes, desertification, exhaustion of natural resources, dearth of leaders, energy shortages, asteroids, humankind's immunological deterioration, overpopulation. But the most vicious

and voracious of all these problems in the privileged nations of the world is over-consumption. If anything good can come from our financial crisis in our world today, is that we are forced to focus on the real substance of life rather than “stuff.”

Jesus revealed to the rich young man the heart of his shortcomings. His "stuff" blocked the substance of life. His love of stuff blocked his way to genuine discipleship, to the kingdom of God. Jesus challenged the man to give up his trust in things, to relinquish his hold on what he held, to give up his control, to take up God's security. In exchange, Jesus offered the rich man a place as one of his disciples.

When is enough, enough?

- When God dwells at the center of our whole life.
- When we follow the way of life offered by Jesus the Christ.
- When we are prompted from the heart.
- When giving is done with cheerfulness.
- When substance replaces stuff.