



ST. JAMES' CHURCH

865 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10021 · 212-288-4100 · www.stjames.org

Sermon for Sunday, February 1, 2009
The Rev. Brenda G. Husson, Rector

STEWARDSHIP SUNDAY

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

It's always good, I think, to try something new. So, after 25 years of ordained ministry, today is the day—I have decided not only to stand on the steps today to give this sermon but also for the first time in those 25 years, what I have to say is not directly tied to the readings or to the Gospel. But it is something that I feel called to say and to talk about with all of you. It begins, not surprisingly, with what happened about ten days ago. About ten days ago I, in consultation with the Vestry, laid some people off from their jobs here; reduced the hours for some of our other employees and announced that we'd made some decisions about closing the church on Mondays and a fair number of Saturdays and earlier in the evenings on some other days.

As soon as I did that and word went out, via email and via the telephone conversations that always happen in this congregation, I had two responses that came quickly back. They seemed, on the one hand, to be quite different from one another. The first was anger, anger at me and anger at the Vestry for having done such a thing, to have taken away people's jobs, to have closed the front doors of the church (something we've never done before). The second response was the sympathetic response and every one of those was couched in the language of "I know how hard this must be for you, but of course, it's what you have to do given this economy – given what's going on out there." I understand both of those responses, by the way. It is a terrible thing to lay someone off from their job. If you've never done it, I hope you never have to. It is a terrible thing and it is angering for them and angering for a lot of people when that happens.

And heaven knows I read the same papers you do; I understand what is happening in the market. I have a retirement account that has taken that same hit the markets have. I get this, and most of all because in my office, and in the offices of the other clergy, we get calls about those of you who have lost your jobs and those of you who fear you will lose your homes and those among us who are trying to figure out if you can keep your children in the schools they've been going to for some years—or not. I do actually know what's going on out there—quite viscerally, as it happens.

But as much as I understood those two kinds of responses, I didn't actually find either of them very helpful. I didn't find them helpful because both of them suggested, in their different ways, that the decisions that I've had to make and the Vestry has had to make somehow didn't have anything to do with us as a community. It was either something the Vestry and I were choosing to do or something that was being imposed upon us because of the market. Neither one of which is actually true. The decisions we've come to have everything to do with us and the

decisions all of us have been making for a number of years. That was brought home to me forcefully this week.

I am a creature of New York City culture and that means, among many other things, that I am used to thinking about giving to the church the same way I think about giving to other institutions. I think about it on an annual basis. All of us are used to annual funds. I actually do know—not that I remember moment to moment—but I actually know what people give here a year. But what I didn't know until this week was how what we give translates if you look at it as what we give *per week*. And weekly actually makes a lot more sense, since most of us are here several times a week or at least every week, every month all through the year. Because that's what the Christian faith looks like and ought to look like. It's something we do all the time and in every season.

So I need to share with you what I found out this week, because what I found out was shocking and painful, and, in fact, demoralizing. And that is that the median gift to this parish per week is \$17. \$17 and change; not \$70, but \$17. \$17 and change.

That's a shocking number to me—despite the people who've lost jobs, despite the economic stress. It is a shocking number. And so I will confess that I spent the first part of this past week feeling pretty depressed and pretty hopeless. But then, I began to think some more and realized that in fact, we do have the ability to change what's gone on and what will keep going on. I have a budget committee meeting this week and I will tell you that though we don't have a printed agenda in front of us, unless things change, the agenda is simply the next round of cuts. But I realize that we do have the ability to change this situation. Because what I realized is that if just 300 households (not 300 people but 300 households, which can be a single person or a family of 8), if 300 households in this congregation gave \$5,000 a year, we wouldn't need to be doing any of this. Let me talk about two immediate reactions you may have to that—one of them is my own. The first is that 300 is a lot of people, but in fact, we have between 600 and 700 people who make a commitment here every year and 500 of them give less than that. So I'm not even asking all of those folks to get up to \$5,000. So perhaps you're thinking, "that's great but I can't write a check for \$5,000." Well, I assure you, neither can I; I can't write a check for \$5,000. I don't have that kind of money sitting in an account.

But I will also tell you that I do give a little over \$5,000 here every year because I don't give it in one check. I give it every week, and every week it's \$100, which I do notice, but I write a check for \$100 every week. I know that there are people in the congregation who can and have given way more than that. Please keep doing that. I also know that there are people, those who have lost their jobs, some of our people on very fixed and very small incomes, who cannot do that. I will tell you most of

those people are extraordinarily generous. But I also know there is this great middle that can easily do that or at least easily do that if they do it weekly. And heaven knows we're trying to make that as easy as we can. This week you'll receive a mailing that talks about weekly giving. And you'll get it in the mail or you'll get it electronically, or maybe both, but it will tell you that you can make that weekly commitment with a credit card, or a debit card or an e-check. Or write a check every week. You don't even have to wait for those materials to arrive. You can go to our website and hit the link that says "Give to St. James" or call up the February Epistle and use the link on the front page that will help you set up your weekly commitment.

What does 300 households giving \$100 a week mean? It increases our annual giving by \$1.5 million immediately. Allowing for the fact that some parishioners who step up to that level already give something, I'll even say maybe the total increase would be a million dollars. Either way, it changes everything. It allows us to pay for everything we do that matters so much to us and use only a modest reasonable and manageable amount of our endowment along the way. That kind of giving means we could weather the likely two and half more years of this economic storm.

I've told you that I think this kind of change is possible and how I think we can do it. But I also know that big change doesn't come easily and the common wisdom is that there is no way you're going to transform the culture of our giving as a congregation in the course of a week.

That's why I need to tell you about the second half of my week. The first half was depressing, as I've said, but in the second half I began to remember some really important things about St. James' Church. And what I remembered was that this has been a church which has always stepped up when someone needed us to step up. This is a congregation that has always taken the lead when someone needed to take that lead. I expect many of you may know some of these things but I want you to hear some of the ways this church, this congregation has again and again defied the common wisdom. Defied the common wisdom and led.

- This church has been a leader in Christian education. You all know that from your own experience now, but that leadership goes back to the 1940s when, all across this country people used "The St. James' Lessons," a curriculum we developed. And this remains the church that people come to and ask for help when they are trying to figure out how to do Christian education and Christian formation.
- This is the church that sponsored the very first woman for ordination in the Diocese of New York in 1977. That was Carol Anderson, who is about to retire as the rector of All Saints, Beverly Hills. But she was the first woman ordained in this diocese and she came from St. James' Church.
- This is the church, when it was politically incorrect, that decided, when South Africa still lived under

apartheid, to divest itself of any investments with corporations doing business in South Africa. A bold, and many thought, a very risky thing to do. But the right thing to do.

- And since we've gotten used to taking risks, this is also one of two parishes in this city that stepped up and loaned a huge sum of money—a million dollars actually—to a consortium of poor churches in the South Bronx, when the South Bronx was the most benighted community in this country. We did that so those churches could build housing for the working poor which the working poor could actually own. They did that and we were paid back but it was real and risky leadership when we did it.
- This is the first large Episcopal church that embraced Stephen Ministry in New York City because we believed that pastoral care could be offered not only by the clergy but also by members of the congregation to one another. And our parishioners have stepped up to undergo extensive training so that they could offer care and their prayers to their fellow parishioners.
- And this is one of two Episcopal churches in the entire country that the Lilly Endowment called and said, "We want to give you a grant because we think you're one of the best churches in the country. We believe you know how to train new clergy so that they can be leaders for the church for generations to come." We have been blessed by having Lilly Fellows, but it was the Lilly Endowment that knew what leaders we can be.

This is a congregation that has defied the common wisdom and stepped up when we needed to, and part of what I'm here to say today is that it's time for us to do that again. Because what we do in Christ's name matters. To us and to the world.

Let me end by saying that there is at least one connection to the Gospel. To today's Gospel, to last Sunday's Gospel, pretty much to all the gospels. Whenever Jesus turned up, saying what he had to say and doing what he did, it provoked a crisis pretty much every time. Because what he said and did made people choose. It made them decide whether they would leave behind the life they had led and the way they had lived it and follow him, or whether they were just going to stay where they were and keep doing what they'd always done. We forget this, but pretty much all of them decided to stay where they were and not change a thing. But a very few of them decided that Jesus was worth the following and those very few not only found their own lives changed, but changed the world. In the grand scheme of New York City, though we are a big Episcopal church, we are a very few—but we have a choice to make and we need to keep choosing to follow Jesus, trusting that our lives will be changed and that, with Christ, we can change the world.

Amen.