

What my pledge means to me

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 25, 2016.

They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share... 2 Timothy 6:18

Most of us were brought up with a sense of duty that is not a popular motivation today. In the Book of Common Prayer we read that it is the duty of all Christians to follow Christ, to come together week by week for corporate worship; and to work, pray, and give for the spread of the Kingdom of God. (Page 856) Most of don't like being told what is our duty. We would rather act out of free choice. Now you and I know that, were it not for a sense of duty and conscience, some things would never get done. We have a duty and responsibility for marriage and family, paying bills, being honest on financial reporting, taking care of ourselves, working with difficult people and accepting the authority of employers and supervisors.

The question for us today is whether we support our church out of duty or choice. Being a good steward of our resources is based on the belief that all we have comes from God. If we are responsible stewards and managers, we return a portion of what we have for God's work. We support the church not because we have to, but because it is part of who we are. It is simply expressing our thanks for what we have by returning a portion of our time, our talent and our treasure to do God's work. Stewardship is being responsible for all of God's gifts on this sojourn of life. Stewards on a ship and flight attendants on a plane are responsible for the distribution of the provisions for the duration of the journey. If they fail to act responsibly, they run out of the provisions before reaching their destination.

All that we have ultimately belongs to God and is to be used responsibly. It is therefore our duty is to see that God's work goes on in this place and beyond. We need to have a strong witness to Christ in an increasingly secular world with competing values. For us to be a healthy, Christ-centered parish, we rely on our collective resources of time, talent and treasure. What we put into our efforts in time and abilities is just as important as what we put in the offering plate. I understand that you may be reluctant to make a pledge of a certain amount of your income to the church because you may not be certain you will be able to fulfill it, but without pledging from all of us, we can't plan a budget. We rely on pledges to build a budget to know what we can count on in the coming year.

I want to share with you what my pledge means to me personally. I pledge to Emmanuel Church not just because it is my duty, but because I want to do my part in supporting the work of this parish. I make a pledge because I believe in what we are all about and because of a profound sense of gratitude for all I have.

For me, this is my opportunity to offer my whole self in God's service in return for what God has given me. All I have comes from God and I return a portion of it not reluctantly or out of fear or duty, not out of compulsion or guilt, but out of a deep sense of gratitude. My relationship to God is deeply personal and is more important than any other relationship.

This great sacrament of the Eucharist that is so central in our life together is about thanksgiving and offering. Because we are thankful for what we receive from God in Christ, we offer a portion of our resources in return. Each time we gather in Christ's name to share in the bread and wine, we are thanking God for what we have received in the life and teaching of Christ Jesus. When we are grateful to someone for what they mean to us or they have done for us, we want to express our appreciation in a tangible way. In the same way, in supporting the church, we are offering our thanks to God for what we have received. What we give to support the church makes possible our worship, education, and outreach. We have been given this beautiful place of worship that we inherited from previous generations and as good stewards we want to keep it in good condition for future generations.

No matter what we do, our efforts will always be imperfect. God accepts our less than perfect selves and helps us to grow into better people. God is never in our debt, but we are indebted to God for the faith we have received. Faith is more than emotion or feeling; it is the assurance and conviction of what we neither see nor understand or can explain. What we give to support the church is what we do after we say, "I believe."

I know that for personal reasons you may not be sure you are able to pledge, but everyone can participate in some way. You may give only when you attend; but we have to know what we can expect when you don't attend. Your pledge allows us to plan and live by a budget. When you do only the minimum, when you are not willing to go beyond a sense of duty, little of significance is accomplished. The priority for me is when I sit down to pay my bills I begin with my church pledge first rather than leaving it for what I may or may not have left over.

I am proud of the stand our church takes on the issues of peace and justice, concern for the environment and the inclusion of all God's people, regardless of gender, race, nationality or sexual orientation. I am glad to be part of a church that reaches out to assure the dignity of every human being. I am honored to belong to a church that emphasizes using our minds in the interpretation of the scriptures. How well we do in managing our resources will make the difference between being a lively parish or a dead one.

Here's the test: A lively church is glad to have sound of infants and children; a dead church doesn't. A lively church has parking problems; a dead church doesn't. A lively church seeks out the means to fund its outreach ministry; a dead church doesn't have to because it isn't doing anything. A lively church takes risks; a dead church always plays it safe. A lively church sees problems as opportunities; a dead church just sees problems. A lively church uses its facilities to serve the neighborhood; a dead church doesn't even know who the neighbors are. A lively church moves bravely into the future; a dead church places its hopes in the past. A lively church dares to dream dreams; a dead church fears what is to come.

Emmanuel is a great parish and I am glad to share in this ministry with you. It is an adventure in faith to be part of this parish family. I invite you to join me in strengthening the support of our journey together in Christ.