

---

## *Sermon*

The Reverend Deacon Edward Fuller  
The Cathedral of St. Philip  
August 12, 2007  
8:45 and 11:15

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

Do not be afraid, sell your possessions and give alms, be dressed for action and have your lamps lit. In this threefold command to his disciples, Jesus sets out a road map for us to prepare for His return.

In our frantic Atlanta lifestyles, getting rid of anxieties and fears may not be as easy as it was in the early 1st century. Our culture proposes multiple remedies for the relief of anxiety and stress. Mood music, aroma therapy, pills, a massage at the local spa and, of course, we might want to try something as radical as prayer to reinforce our faith that we do not need to be afraid.

The second of Jesus' commands may be far more problematic. He says to his disciples "it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom". God wants to give us the KINGDOM of heaven and what he requires of us is that we give alms - that is, to give to the poor. If we take this literally, there's a good bit of wiggle room here if that is what we are looking for. He doesn't say that we should give everything as alms' it just emphasizes the getting rid of the possessions.

There was a film about Blessed Thomas Beckett in the 1960's. In the film Richard Burton played the lead role of the archbishop of Canterbury. Now, before his calling, Beckett had been a libertine, and when ordained archbishop he goes through a ceremony divesting himself of all his earthly possessions. He invites the poor into the cathedral and distributes all he has item by item. At one point he stops, points to the crucifix hanging over the altar, and whispers harshly, " You are the only one who knows how easy this is! Everyone else thinks it is difficult!" In this brilliant scene the message comes through that spirituality leads to sacrifice, but that the sacrifices are easy because of the joy and the fulfillment that comes from giving away one's earthly possessions to meet the needs of the poor. I wonder if, like me, you still struggle to come to terms with that. I struggle to grasp the fullness of that joy, of that way of life. I know that I still feel there is more joy in holding on, to keeping things, than getting rid of them. But it is not just material things - it extends to thoughts, prejudices, ways of life - all and any one of these can become a blockage to the realization of the joy that God has in store for us, that God wants for us.

As we dig a little deeper into this passage we note that the word translated to "alms" comes from a word meaning "mercy". So, this alms giving required to receive the Kingdom means more than just throwing a donation to the poor, it means being merciful to those in need. It means the kind of mercy that comes from deep inside a person - not just a physical action but an act of mercy given and done from a true conviction and love of God.

If you are like me, handing out mercy is not always the easiest thing to do. For most of us, it is not easy to show mercy to an aggressive panhandler. We may (or may not) give them some money but most of us are not able to reach deep within ourselves and offer up the kind of mercy that God is asking for. Martin Luther King Jr. said: "Life's most persistent and urgent question is: what are you doing for others?"

How do we show mercy to those we dislike? How do we show mercy to those whose lifestyles are repugnant to us? How do we show mercy to the dirty smelly homeless man on the streets? We can begin, of course by encountering the Christ in others. When we do that, doors of opportunity for acceptance open wide and acts of mercy are always easier when we can accept the other person in all of their pain, all of their dysfunction, all of their brokenness all of their humanity. And, when we strip it down to that level, they look very much like us.

It is easy to preach about these things in this place because I know we are individually and corporately capable of great acts of mercy.

We give 10% of our budget as alms to the poor through Outreach Grants.

Some of us go out to meet the poor where they are and serve them every week in some of the ugliest and most disgusting of places in our city where children of God are consigned to live and attempt to survive, where people from this parish go to seek the Christ in others and serve them - surely these are acts of mercy.

The preparations underway for a mission trip to Africa will be financially, physically and emotionally challenging for many as they go forward to seek the Christ in those who live on less than \$1 per day, who lack basic shelter, whose children go to bed hungry every night and where controllable diseases still result in death because there are inadequate or no medical supplies - surely acts of mercy will abound on this mission trip.

Alms giving and acts of mercy are at work in this place in so many ways and it is a joyous and wonderful thing to behold "Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven"

Several years ago my niece worked for a convention center in St. Louis. She told me of two church conventions held there one summer. One was a group of Pentecostals who she described as animated, happy and joyous. She said that when they passed the collection plate, people were putting in money, jewelry and other personal possessions. Having grown up in the same small Presbyterian community where I grew up, she thought this was a bit weird.

She then told me of a second convention of another faith group where the people were staid (I think she said stiff), relatively quiet and didn't show much emotion. No, they were not Episcopalians!

She said she didn't understand the first group and their giving so generously but they were a lot nicer to be around than the second group. That, my friends, is encountering the Christ in others and that is being present with them when alms are given.

So, the price here may be a bit higher than it appears on the surface. But, this may well be one of those times that price is, in fact, directly related to value. Our true treasure trove is in heaven and that is where the true value lies, that is where our hearts should be.

I suggest to you that it takes a tremendous amount of faith to give away one's precious possessions in hopes of inheriting the Kingdom, something that is not seen. It is only faith that can lead us to accept the Gospel imperatives. Faith, the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. We stand and recite the Nicene Creed every Sunday. It is our statement of faith, the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. "He will come again in Glory to judge the living and the dead"

The world we live in measures our personal value by what we possess. We talk about the "net worth" of people and that leads us to believe that the value of a person's life really does consist of the abundance of possessions.

I am probably guiltier of that than anyone. In my "other life" as a business executive, I frequently report to a very successful man. I keep track of what the business press says about our company and its owner. I always check to see where he is on the Forbes list of the wealthiest men in the world. The Forbes list, of course, describes wealth in terms of monetary value of possessions

As I read the list this week, I couldn't help but wonder who would be on the list if wealth was measured by the unfailing

treasure in heaven, that treasure that cannot be stolen or destroyed. Who would be on the list of the 400 richest in soul? I also couldn't help but wonder what impact it would have on our culture if we reported "treasure in heaven" instead of "treasure on earth".

I think Jesus would say that our society's definition of one's "net worth" based solely on material possessions is way off base and that we need to re-think it.

As challenging and difficult as it may appear, this second command to sell possessions and give alms may very well be easier than the third.

We live in a society where "this life" is the be-all and end-all and we are so overloaded with information and our thoughts so scattered and we are constantly being tugged in multiple directions by people, demands on our time and the tugs of our hearts that is just seems impossible to be fully on guard at all times. I think that, quite possibly, the best we can do is to try and establish and hang on to a focus in life that is Christ centered seeking first God's kingdom and righteousness. And, when we slip off that track, to get back on as quickly as we can.

Part of being prepared for the coming of Christ is to expect it. The slaves expect it and work as if the master were already present. The homeowner expects a thief and secures his house and treasures. Christians know Jesus is coming and we are to live as if he were already here: not building up wealth for ourselves, but giving alms (showing mercy), which builds up a treasure in heaven that will not be taken from us. A good part of being on guard -- being prepared -- is to live as best we can as though He were already here. The best things in life are not things. Amen.

Comments? Contact The Rev. Ed Fuller at: [efuller@stphilipscathedral.org](mailto:efuller@stphilipscathedral.org)