

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**  
*Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on October 17, 2010 (Proper 24, Year C)*

It truly was compelling. Many of us were glued to our televisions this week as the story of the Chilean miners quite literally came to light. It was a dramatic and successful rescue in a situation that seemed devoid of hope when it was first reported. The odds were not good for the 33 men buried half a mile below the earth's surface. Yet through modern engineering and old-fashioned prayer these miners were given new life. Images of resurrection and new birth were difficult for even the most hardened cynic to disavow. My only regret was that this all didn't take place in the early spring because it would have made one heck of an illustration for my Easter sermon.

I also loved the fact that friends, family, and loved ones all gathered at what they started calling Camp Hope. A desolate piece of land became a place of prayer and waiting and anticipation and ultimately reunion. Setting aside the larger issue of conditions at gold, copper, diamond, and coal mines throughout the world, this was a story of hope in the midst of despair; of victory in the face of defeat; of life snatched out of the clutches of certain death. In other words, a resounding echo of the Gospel of Christ.

I like to think of St. John's as a sort of Camp Hope. A place where the Good News of the gospel is shared; a place where we are formed in the Spirit and sent back out into the world to do God's work; a place where the values of compassion and love and generosity are honed and lived out; a place where life's meaning and the importance of faith comes into focus; a place where we live out this particular leg of our respective journeys of life and faith. All of which is why I so value this community and encourage you to be generously supportive of it both spiritually and financially.

Yes, this is the rector's annual stewardship sermon and at this time I would ask the ushers to please lock the doors. I actually must admit that I love preaching about money. Partly because it was Jesus' favorite topic – 2/3 of his parables relate to money in some way. But mostly because it makes us all a bit uncomfortable. The mere mention of money from the pulpit causes women to pull their purses a bit closer and men to shift their weight to make sure their wallets are secured beneath them. And, of course, I'm not going to speak generically about money; I'm going to talk about *your* money.

Now, some people feel that it's unseemly for their priest to talk about finances; that it breaches the great divide between the spiritual and the temporal; that money is a private matter not for public consumption. Something you might talk about with your banker but never your parish priest. But I just don't buy that, so to speak, because money is an integral part of life; not a dirty little secret. When Jesus talks about money he speaks of its dual nature – the temptation to turn money into a false god but also its tremendous potential to do good. And the way we approach money can be either life-enslaving or life-giving. The reality is that money plays an important role in our lives whether or not we speak about it publicly and to pretend otherwise is an inauthentic approach to the life of faith.

I can't say I've ever preached a stewardship sermon based on these lessons. Usually it coincides with the widow's mite or the passage about storing up treasure in heaven. But this morning we get Jacob wrestling with an angel and Jesus telling a parable about the unjust judge. And in particular I find something quite appropriate about hearing this story about Jacob. The encounter brings a mysterious divine being into human form to wrestle with Jacob. It's one of the more intriguing and commented

upon and interpreted stories in all of Scripture. Wrestling suggests both intimacy and struggle – certainly evocative of our relationship with money.

The context behind the story is fear. You'll recall that Jacob had stolen his brother Esau's birthright by disguising himself to receive his father Isaac's blessing. Now Jacob hears that Esau is coming to meet him with 400 men in tow. You'd better believe Jacob's a nervous wreck when he hears this. He's terrified that Esau is coming to exact his revenge so he sends his family across the river to safety and prepares to meet his brother alone. So Jacob begins the evening in the same state we often approach money: in fear. We're fearful that we won't have enough money and we don't trust God enough to provide for our needs.

When we speak of stewardship in the church we talk about the importance of giving our time, talent, and treasure. So there are many ways of giving that transcend the financial. But this morning, as you know, I am focusing on the financial side of stewardship; the sharing of our monetary resources. And I'm excited to do so because I believe passionately in what is happening here at St. John's; I'm convinced that the Spirit is moving and drawing us into new things and new ministries and new ways of being together.

And opportunities abound. As of August we have a new curate (thanks be to God) and we need to fund this position for a full year in 2011. I would like to see a third service added – probably a Saturday evening liturgy – and that will take additional resources. We are engaged in a website redesign that will both serve as the first impression for newcomers and allow us to interact with one another and engage in our respective ministries in more effective ways. With Mother Anne's leadership we continue to build the youth ministry at St. John's, this year adding a Senior Youth Group to go with the existing youth group for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders. It seems that we are adding ministries and programs on a weekly basis. Of course we are also committed to continuing what we do best: offering inspiring liturgy and music in the Anglican tradition to the glory of God. Worship in the beauty of holiness remains at the heart of who we are and what we do.

And all of this takes money. Ministry doesn't happen magically; programs don't appear out of thin air; staff members don't work for free; buildings don't heal themselves. So what am I asking you to do? I'll be very clear because when it comes to financial need I have no patience for euphemism or beating around the burning bush. We need everyone to pledge to St. John's. If you believe in what is happening here and are in a position to increase your pledge, I encourage you to do so. If you have never before pledged or if it is not part of your previous faith experience, I encourage you to do so. Partly because the church needs money and partly because we all have a need to give. Generosity is a value we need to model and not simply talk about. And, frankly, it feels good.

You'll recall that the story of Jacob wrestling the angel ends with a blessing. After a long night of struggle, Jacob bids the angel to offer him a blessing as daybreak approaches. And as you wrestle with your own life's priorities and your financial commitment to this particular community of faith, I do know that a blessing will come of any honest and prayerful struggle over the question of how much to pledge. With generous hearts there is no telling what new and exciting ministries might be unleashed around here. And I am continually reminded that "God's power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine."