

Sermon for Sunday, October 11, 2015  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Every so often  
I go to relax on a Sunday evening in front of the TV  
and turn on PBS  
only to hear those dreaded words  
Fall pledge drive.  
Normal programming has been displaced.  
Instead of my favorite Masterprice Mysteries  
we have Susie Orman  
or Andre Rieux - not that there's anything wrong with them  
but they're just not what I'm looking for  
on a Sunday evening.  
And so I turn the TV off,  
and vow not to watch PBS  
until the fund drive is over.

This month  
is stewardship month here at St James  
and I hope that it doesn't mean  
that you'll turn us off  
for the next month.  
Because our focus on Stewardship each fall  
is more than just a pledge drive.  
It is time to look at  
the whole idea of stewardship,  
of being good stewards of all that God has given us.

And it begins  
way back at the beginning of the bible  
in Genesis  
chapter one,  
when God creates  
the heavens and the earth.  
God creates  
day and night  
sky and earth and sea

plants and trees  
sun moon and stars  
birds and fish and animals.  
And then God creates  
human beings,  
creates us  
in God's own image.  
to live in this wonderful earth  
that God has created,  
to use it,  
to care for it,  
this wonderful gift  
of God.

And the picture we have  
of that idyllic time in Eden  
is of people living in harmony with nature  
and with God.

But it doesn't last long.  
the story of the fall  
is a story of betrayal  
and doubt  
and fear.  
And a rift opens up  
between God  
and humans  
and between humans and the rest of creation.  
No longer living in harmony;  
now in struggle.

But we still have  
that commission God gave us  
as stewards  
of God's gifts.

But what was once natural  
now has to be deliberate, intentional.  
And so we have the laws  
the ten commandments  
and the other six hundred odd

that codify everything about  
the relationship between God and the people  
and between the people  
and the rest of creation.

The first four of the ten commandments  
focus on how we live with God,  
worshipping God alone,  
taking a sabbath, one day in seven  
to spend time with God  
and to rest  
just as God rested  
on the seventh day of creation.

Then we have the remains six commandments, the ones  
that Jesus refers to  
in our gospel today,  
commandments about how  
to live with one another.

But then you have  
the other six hundred odd commandments,  
which few of us Christians  
have even read.  
And what they are about  
is how worshipping God  
spills over  
into the whole of life.

And one way  
is how we live  
as stewards  
of creation.

Did you know  
that the sabbath  
was not just for humans  
but for every living being.  
So there was to be no work done on the seventh day,  
not just by us,

but by the beasts of burden, donkeys and oxen, as well.  
And then, every seven years,  
there was to be a sabbath year.  
In that year,  
fields were to be left to lie fallow  
and animals were not worked.  
Everything rested.  
Anything the land produced naturally  
you could go collect,  
but all of creation,  
the earth itself  
was allowed  
to rest.

Today we know  
that letting fields lie fallow  
allows them  
to retain their fertility;  
the good stewardship of the bible  
is backed up by science.

One day in seven,  
one year in seven,  
for the good of all creation.

But they weren't the only laws  
that had to do with stewardship.  
There were laws about how you cared for those in need,  
for widows and orphans and strangers in the land, that is, immigrants  
so that no one was left destitute.  
There were laws about how to deal with money  
and what to do about debts.  
And there were the laws  
about tithing.  
It was the expectation  
that every person gave  
one tenth of what they earned  
back to God.  
Not just money,  
but things they grew.

If your sheep had ten lambs  
you gave one to God.  
If your tree bore five hundred apples  
you gave fifty to God.  
If you had a patch of mint  
you gave a tenth of it  
to God.

And yes, the tithe provided  
the livelihood of the priests at the temple.  
But that wasn't its primary purpose.  
That just happened to be  
the way that God used it.  
The primary purpose  
was to help people remember  
that all they had,  
even life itself  
was the generous gift  
of God.

We no longer live  
in a primarily agricultural society.  
I don't think anyone here  
farms  
as their primary vocation.  
Stewardship  
looks different for us.  
But the principles are the same.  
Recognizing that everything was created by  
and fundamentally belongs  
to God.  
And that we are stewards of it.

And then comes Jesus.  
Then comes Jesus,  
and reminds us  
that it is not only what we have  
that is the gift of God  
but our very lives.  
Our lives

are the gift of God.  
And he calls us  
to offer our own lives  
for God's sake - not as a sacrifice in a temple,  
but in how we live,  
loving God  
with our hearts, and souls, and minds, and strength,  
and loving our neighbors  
as ourselves.

Christ's call  
is to give up everything  
not just  
a seventh  
or a tenth.  
To dedicate ourselves,  
all that we are and all that we have  
to him.

That's why  
the man  
in our gospel today  
went away grieving.  
Because he didn't want to let go.  
He couldn't imagine  
leaving everything behind  
to follow Jesus.

And the reality is  
that Jesus didn't ask that of everybody,  
not in a literal sense.  
Most of those who came to him  
went back to their own homes, their own lives.  
Remember the story of the woman at the well?  
Jesus sent her home,  
so dramatically changed  
by that one conversation,  
that she couldn't help  
but share the good news.

## Stewardship

is about recognizing that everything we have  
and everything we are  
comes from God,  
belongs to God  
and is to be used in God's service.

Whether it's the ninety percent we keep  
or the ten percent we give back,  
of our time,  
our gifts and skills,  
and yes, even our money.

And so

I'd like you to take a moment to think  
and then what are some of the blessings  
that God has given you,  
and how might you  
give back to God.

And then turn to someone near you, preferably not from your family, and share some of your thoughts.