

SPR | October 4, 2020 | The Rev. Catherine Healy

My daughter turned two last week, so I've been thinking a lot about the week of her birth. During the days our family spent in the hospital, it seemed like every fifteen minutes, a new health care professional would duck into our room and give us advice in direct contradiction to the advice someone else had given us fifteen minutes before. *Send the baby to the nursery so you can get some rest! Don't send the baby to the nursery; it will interfere with her attachment! Give the baby formula or she'll become malnourished! Don't give the baby formula or she'll never learn to nurse!*

We quickly learned that the best approach to most of this advice was to ignore it. But we did get one piece of counsel that I've been thinking about a lot in quarantine. A doctor with two young children of her own sat down by the bed and looked us sternly in the eyes.

"Look," she said. "This is really hard. You have never needed help in your lives like you're about to need it right now. And people will *want* to help you. If someone brings you casseroles, eat them. If someone offers to come scrub your toilet or take out the trash, let them. This is a time to just do what you can and let yourselves be loved."

That turned out to be the very best advice we got for being new parents. And it's been my best advice to myself, and everyone else, over the last seven months of the global pandemic: This is really hard. Let people help you. Just do what you can and let yourself be loved.

By now, most of you have gotten our fall stewardship mailing and learned about our theme for the coming year: *Glad and Generous Hearts*, inspired by the book of Acts, chapter 2. The phrase comes not from a thrilling story but from an interlude: First the Holy Spirit descends on the apostles at Pentecost, then Peter gives a fiery sermon, then people start flocking to the new church.

Then they start to settle into their new daily life. The story continues: "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, having spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people."¹

Ultimately, a life of faith will *have* some exciting moments, but it isn't *about* the exciting moments. It's about praising God and committing to our relationships with God and

¹ Acts 2:44-47.

others. Because of our faith, we share our resources. Because of our faith, we have glad and generous hearts, even when we're stuck breaking bread at home.

We do what we can, let people help us, and let ourselves be loved.

"Stewardship" is a church word in need of some rebranding, since talking about ourselves as "stewards" always makes me think of flight attendants. But ultimately, being stewards is about how we live in community and share our resources of skill, money, and time: giving freely from what we have, and accepting help when we have a need.

In the Ten Commandments, which we heard in the Exodus reading today, it's pretty clear where the foundations of our community lie. The commandments start in the center and work outward. The first four address our relationship with God. The next, our relationship with family. The last five, our relationship with everyone else.

They're not sequenced by importance or difficulty, but by a gradual expansion of the circle. You start by getting right with God, offering up your life and everything you have in gratitude. Once that connection is strong, it's much easier to be compassionate and generous with your family. And when you're caring for your own family in the best way you know how, you have a model for how to be in relationship with others.

COVID-19 has made this a strange year for fundraising, especially for places normally structured by membership. With a zoo or a museum, it feels odd to remain a dues-paying member of a place that is still partly or entirely closed. I would argue, though, that the church is a little bit different. In being part of a church, the focus is not entirely on what we can gain, nor entirely on what we can give. Instead, it's about being in those relationships, sharing with others out of what God has so freely given us.

Jesus tackles this from a somewhat less warm and fuzzy angle in today's Gospel. The parable of the wicked tenants, as it's sometimes called, is a reminder that even if we're the ones who produce it, the produce of the land ultimately belongs to God.

As with most churches, the majority of our budget is dedicated to programs and staffing costs. I can say with great confidence that the staff of SPR has adapted brilliantly to a set of circumstances no one could have foreseen. They are working harder than ever, though their time is now deployed differently. Time that would have been spent preparing for rich in-person worship is now spent on audio recording and video editing; time that would have been spent on children's and youth formation in person is now spent brainstorming what might possibly keep the kids engaged over

Zoom. But we are so fortunate to have this team of people serving as ministers, and it is largely because of their efforts that the church in Corona has found new ways to thrive.

Over the coming weeks, you'll hear from different members of SPR about what the church has meant to them and why they choose to give with glad and generous hearts. I hope that you will be inspired to do the same, and become or remain a pledging member of St. Paul & the Redeemer for 2021. Especially in a time of global crisis, sharing our resources is the best way we can keep caring for one another.

Remember, when you make a financial pledge, you are pledging to this: Do what you can, let people help you, and let yourself be loved.

Amen.