

# Sermons at Christ Church

## Arise, for the task is yours, take courage and do it.

Pentecost XV

The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

*God, help me discern what matters and what does not. What helps me trust you and serve the world. Set my mind on what is actually true and life-giving. Fix my mind on your grace, and give me faith to let go of everything else. For nothing else will fit in this little lifeboat but me and you, and your infinite grace. Amen.*

Is there a Balm in Gilead? Asks the prophet who ponders on the destruction, desolation, brokenness, pain and hurt that God's people and land have suffered, and wonders if there's any balm in Gilead-if there's any possible mending and restoration for God's broken people, if there's some soothing words of comfort and welcome for God's hurting people, if there's any oil to heal the deep wounds God's people carry with them. Yes, there's balm in Gilead, and it is free. In fact, it has always been free. The Giver freely gives the balm to the receiver, and the receiver freely receives the balm. This mutual giving and receiving is the bedrock of any relationship, and especially of the relationship between God and us, and of the rich man and the manager. However, the sustainability of that and any relationship thrives on stewardship of the balm that has been freely given and received.

God doesn't withhold His gifts from us, God freely gives to us. But do we embrace each gift from a sober reality of gratitude or from a sense of entitlement? If our approach is based on entitlement, then we stand a greater chance of losing what had been freely given to us. The people of Israel lost lives and property because of that sense of entitlement. The manager is about to lose all that to which he felt entitled. We hate to lose what we have, but losing is a stark reminder to us that nothing is given, nothing is free, no one owes us anything and that at every point in our lives, our watch-word should be one of a gratitude based relationship and not entitlement.

God, the rich man, doesn't owe the manager anything. Yet, God gives to the manager for free. Grace is given to us for free. The tragedy was when the manager, like the people of Israel lost their sense of gratitude and embraced grace as an entitlement. It is at that moment that managers like you and me begin to hold on to old visions of who we think we should be-autonomous managers who believe that freedom is merely the surrender to appetite. But it is not.

True freedom rejects any sense of entitlement that leads us to take life and others for granted. We fail to acknowledge the freedom within grace, and that our gift to each other is to see the terrific gift in each other at all times and in all circumstances, and not when we are faced with the inadequacy of our sense of entitlement.

The rich man has heard complaints about the manager. He is squandering his property. The rich man doesn't fire him right away, but offers him the opportunity to render an account of his stewardship. Recognizing that he had nothing to render, he seeks to buy favors from the rich man's debtors. He knew he couldn't count on himself to do anything for himself, he also knew that one good turn deserves another. And so he hinged his hopes on the belief that those to whom he extends favor would remember and be grateful enough to welcome him in his moment of need.

The rich man calls him shrewd and applauds his actions. Not because what he did was right, but because within that precious moment he lost that sense of entitlement and self-sufficiency. He is shrewd because he is now wise enough to hinge his hopes on the grateful heart of others. Talk about a shift from gratitude to entitlement.

Jesus recommends this behavior because a grateful heart is always aware of the gift of grace. That heart not only believes in the idea of the Giver and the Receiver, but the two-way street that establishes the gracious relationship between the Giver and the Receiver. God is the rich man who gives, you and I-the manager are the receivers. We are stewards of what we freely receive. But the point is, if there is no one to receive, what becomes of the gift of the giver? Or, if there is no one in need of help, what becomes of our desire to help? The one who receives proffers meaning to the one who gives. God the giver needs you and me-the receivers to offer meaning to the gifts and responsibilities that He gives to us. God needs us to offer meaning to what it means to be God.

For that reason, the grateful heart never feels entitled but believes in accountability, and solely because of that, he or she does not spare a moment in being a good steward to all that has been entrusted to his or her care. The grateful heart's ability to be faithful over little, opens him or her up to be entrusted with more, and the more isn't wealth, but a life rich with meaning and purpose. You know, when our intellect learns to recognize a gift for what it is, when our will learns to acknowledge that gift, when our feelings appreciate that gift, worlds come alive because of our sense of gratitude.

The grateful heart does not dwell on the illusion of independence-for what does it mean to be independent anyway? The manager's actions help us to understand that there's nothing independent about life.

We all depend on someone or something and the grateful heart thrives on interdependence. The bonds of interdependence are those that set us free, free to acknowledge our dependence on each other and the Giver who offers us the ultimate gift of His Son. For me, the circle of gratefulness is incomplete until the Giver of the gift becomes the Receiver: a receiver of thanks enmeshed in proper stewardship of that gift. That's all that God demands of us-people who are grateful enough to recognize that even in our brokenness, God still dares to give us a second chance.

Jesus tells the gospel story to lift up the idea that as dishonest as the manager was, he was honest enough to accept his own vulnerability-that sense of entitlement which has shaped his stewardship of the property he manages. In the end, he could not save himself, he could not depend or count on himself, and like you and me, could not help himself, were he to lose the job. He had to depend on the goodness and benevolence of friends. There's a Filipino concept of *utang na loob*, which is literally translated to mean "inner debt" or a "debt of inner gratitude." This concept sums up the approach of the manager- a debt rooted in the shared reciprocity of friends. Even though he is still a sinner who is looking out for his own interests he models a behavior the disciples can emulate. Instead of simply being a victim of circumstance, he transforms a bad situation into one that benefits him and others. He creates a new set of relationships based not on the vertical relationship between lenders and debtors but on something more like the reciprocal and egalitarian relationships of friends. Inner debt.

We are in the same position as the manager who saw the imminent disaster threatening him with ruin. This man recognized the critical nature of his situation, and did not let things take their course, he acted, unscrupulously no doubt, but he acted boldly, resolutely, and prudently with the sole purpose of making a new life for himself. And that new life is made possible to those who recognize the gift of the Christ who saves us.

Paul writes that prayers, supplications and thanksgiving be made for everyone. To give thanks is to accept the humble disposition of gratitude but also the pledge of stewardship. The greatest gift we can give is thanksgiving. In giving gifts to others, we often give what we can spare but in giving thanks, we give ourselves. There's no Christian ritual which expresses our common call of gratitude than the gift of gathering at the table of the Eucharist. We come to the table of thanksgiving not as perfect or accountable managers, but as broken, hurting, fallen and desiring the balm of Gilead. If this manager could not count on himself, we too cannot count on ourselves. If the manager counted on the inner debt of his friends, then we too can count on Jesus-the one who was gifted to save us and acts as mediator between God and us.

Jesus concludes his story with these words, you cannot worship God and Mormon. Indeed, all through my short life, I have never wondered about God's provision of His balm. I have often wondered whether I am a good steward of it. But this I know, gratitude in itself engenders a sense of stewardship. And so, however, big or small I feel the balm is, I still remain thankful. And so long as I am grateful, I can only worship God because I am humble enough to reject any sense of entitlement. More than that, it is only in God do we find the invitation to allow God to come to term in us. Allow yourself to be wooed by God, allow yourself to remain grateful to the Giver. Amen.

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