

Rendered Well

A thinker named John Ruskin once said, “*There is no wealth but life. Life, including all its powers of love, of joy, and of admiration. That country is the richest which nourishes the greatest numbers of noble and happy human beings; that [person] is richest, who, having perfected the functions of his own life to the utmost, has also the widest helpful influence, both personal, and by means of his possessions, over the lives of others.*” Ruskin was born in 1819 and lived throughout the rest of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, spending a good bit of his life in a London ‘come alive’ after the Industrial Revolution. An art critic, more generally a social critic, and a philanthropist, Ruskin saw quite early on the dangers that come with an exaggerated pursuit of wealth and status. Maybe it was his deep appreciation of nature that caused him to step back from a pursuit of wealth and status. Perhaps it was a general disinterest in wealth and power that allowed him to be critical of the excesses of his age. Or, what I’ve come to believe is the truth, it was his conviction that a disciple’s path in following Jesus demands a life of sacrifice, both in honor of God and for the betterment of our sisters and brothers.

As I prepared to preach this week, thinking about *stewardship*, I couldn’t shake from my mind the theme of sacrifice. Not the sanitized idea of sacrifice, where we give up something that we generally like when we don’t want to, but after giving it up, we find we don’t really need it. I’m talking about the kinds of sacrifices we feel deep down in our bones. The sacrifices that, when made, might cause us to fear how we will live without what we have given up...a sacrifice that initially leaves us with a void to fill...a sacrifice that just might cost us our very lives. And as I read, and re-read, Jesus’ famous

words “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s”, I was challenged to think about what it is I actually have to give God that would matter in the grand scheme of things. And the only answer I could come up with that carried any weight is this: the only thing, the only thing I have to give God that would be worth the sacrifice is myself. All of me. Blood and bones, soul and spirit...all I really have to give God that would matter is my life.

Too often, we approach these words from the Gospel as if all they are is settling the matter of paying taxes. Time and time again, in conversation and commentary, it seems that the weight of this statement is placed predominantly on Jesus’ command to “give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s.” But as I read this passage, in conversation with Jesus’ other words on money, stewardship, and discipleship, the real weight is on his command to “give God the things that are God’s.” Empires rise and empires fall. Nation-states come to power and in a single generation fall away. Taxes come and taxes go. But what is more universal, more binding for Christians, and quite frankly more terror-inducing and sacrifice-demanding is to give to God what is God’s. John Ruskin, the thinker I mentioned before, said in another place, “We need examples of people who, letting Heaven decide whether they are to rise in the world, decide for themselves that they will be happy in it, and have resolved to seek—not greater wealth but simpler pleasure; not higher fortune, but deeper felicity; making the first of possession, self-possession.”

If you could be certain that you would not be judged, critiqued, or looked down upon, how would you answer the question, “What do I really want out of life?” As we continue moving through our stewardship season, perhaps that’s an appropriate question

to ask ourselves. “What do I really want out of life?” Search your heart. At the deepest part of what makes you *you*, what do you desire and prize over all else? Taking your answer, taking my own answer, let’s set them next to Jesus’ command to “give God the things that are God’s.” I have literally taken oaths of obedience to the service of Christ and his Church, and re-affirmed that commitment here at St. Peter’s, and even I can’t say that all of my desires fall in lock-step with Jesus’ command. But, the truth remains, that we who have “been sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever” have a different obligation than those outside of the Church. Our obligation is to set ourselves aside for the good of the Church and the World...to find ourselves presented as a sacrifice on the altar along with the bread and wine...to be a people who willingly give of all the riches we have, financial and otherwise, to be used for the reconciling of the world, the healing of the nations.

First and foremost, we are baptized Christians. But more particularly, those of us who have found a home at this church...We are St. Peter’s. This stewardship season, let us together think about what it means for us as a community, and as individuals, to collectively say “I am St. Peter’s.” Being church is not a spectator sport. All of us together make this great, grand experiment with a 200 year history what it is today. With Jesus’ words echoing in our ears to “give God the things that are God’s”, and a constant returning to the question, “What do I really want out of life?” let us together, under the guidance of the Spirit, usher in a new age of strength, compassion, transformation, and reconciliation at St. Peter’s Episcopal Church!