**Charity and Stewardship**

A sermon by The Rev. Christopher Wendell

For the 20th Sunday after Pentecost

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church

Bedford, Massachusetts

As some of you may recall, a few years back there was a big hospital shakeup here in Massachusetts. In November 2010, the non-profit Roman Catholic hospital chain Caritas Christi was in trouble. They were losing money and, though they were doing good work, it was clear that they wouldn’t be able to do good work for much longer. So they decided to sell six of their hospitals to a newly formed ownership group. Using a different business model this new group intended to keep these hospitals open, purchase others, and improve low-cost quality community hospital care in Massachusetts.

I bring this up today not so that we can ponder the intricacies of health care economics in Massachusetts. Rather, I have a much less complicated observation about this transaction. When the new ownership group was formed, they had to select a new name for their holding company. No doubt they wanted to select something that retained the religious ethos of Caritas. And so the name that they chose was Steward Health Care System. From Caritas to Steward.

The name change makes some sense. Caritas, in Latin, means charity. The old hospital system was run as a charity. With the new enterprise being a for-profit venture, that name didn’t quite make as much sense anymore. More importantly though, there was a fundamental shift in mission of these hospitals – not just to continue to serve the community hospital population, but also to become part of the solution to making health care costs more sustainable in Massachusetts. The Caritas model just wasn’t sustainable. The new venture would have to be. Their new name, Steward, suggested a commitment not just to care for the suffering who present themselves, but to creating sustainability for this kind of quality community-based care over the long term.

Theologically, they hit the nail on the head with the name change. Since they wanted their endeavor to be both caring and sustainable, they needed to be more than just a charity responding to need, they needed to be responsible stewards of a sustainable endeavor that served a specific mission.

I’ve been thinking about this as I’ve been pondering what my annual stewardship message would be to you this year. A lot of people think about their church giving as a form of caritas, or, in English, charity. Charity is a Christian virtue to be sure. It shares the same root as the Latin word for heart *cordia*, and related to one of the many theological words for love. Charity is the love we show to others based on our sense of empathy with them. This invitation to aiding others in need with our resources is central to our discipleship as Christians. Jesus certainly both modeled for and instructed his closest friends in the practice of charity. The way in which charity opens our awareness to the needs of others is a key pathway to increasing the amount of compassion and understanding in the world, and to creating the Kingdom of God. And charitable works, the provision of resources for people in need, is an ongoing part of the life of Christian communities like St. Paul’s.

But while our annual pledges to St. Paul’s are considered “charitable gifts” by the IRS, within our community we call the pledge process something else. We don’t call it charity. We call it Stewardship. Stewardship differs from charity in some key ways. First, while charity is our faithful response to immediate, unpredictable needs as they present themselves; Stewardship is our intentional way of being responsible for something beyond ourselves. These are different things, and they are both good, and necessary in different circumstances. For example, when the food pantry in town has an explosion of need, the appropriate immediate response isn’t to carefully sketch out a five year budget, make a plan for raising pledges, receive the money over time, and then, in about 18 months, the shelves will be full! No, you put out the box and say, “hey, can anyone bring in some extra cans?” That’s charity. Now, if the need remains high, eventually you sit down and make a budget, talk to your partners in town and said, can we make a plan to meet this need in a sustainable, responsible way for the years ahead. That’s stewardship.

Both charity and stewardship matter to a church. A church can’t maintain itself as an organization without reliable annual stewardship pledges to support the core operations of our community. And our organization wouldn’t be a church if we stopped putting the box out when a crisis of need presents itself, saying, sorry, we already did our part. Stewardship without charity makes us cold to the needs of others. Charity without stewardship is irresponsible for everyone involved, and causes frustration when the systemic needs never seem to be met.

The other major difference is that charity is primarily an individual action, while stewardship is a collective action. Charity is more about our personal response to suffering in the world and the realities of injustice that create much of that suffering. Stewardship is more about our collective responsibility to serve God’s mission of reconciliation, justice and peacemaking. Our stewardship pledges are ways of signaling our intentions to transform the world together, through creating a Christian community that will enhance our ability to be agents of divine compassion, mercy and justice in the world. Because this type of transformational work is aimed at cultivating hearts of gratitude, passion, and service, it’s a long-term strategy for creating more peace and compassion in the world. But it’s one that we know has worked for decades here in Bedford, and for centuries throughout the world.

Being a steward is a recognition that we’re all in this together, and we’re in it for the long haul. Our stewardship pledges bring us closer together in pursuit of a shared goal: growing a sustainable Christian community that seeks to help people of all ages know the love of God more deeply and be touched by that love to transform the world into a place of greater peace, mercy and hope.

And really that mission is what we’re actually being stewards of when we pledge. We aren’t just stewards of the church. I mean, don’t get me wrong, taking care of the church community, our property, our people, our programs – that matters. But only because the church is the most visible vehicle for the love of God on earth, and that is really what we are called to be stewards of more than anything else. We are called to be stewards of the love of God on earth. To be responsible for embodying that love to others, to ourselves, and to all of creation.

A pledge is your way of helping St. Paul’s carry out that mission, not for our own sake, but for the sake of the world. A world that so badly needs vehicles promoting God’s endless love for all people, God’s gracious forgiveness, and God’s hope for peace and reconciliation everywhere. I pledge because church is the best long term solution I know to creating more generous, self-giving, and loving people in the world. And nothing is more important than leaving behind a world with greater love in it than when we found it. Amen.