**Stewardship Sermon**

By Mr. John MacPhee

Sunday, October 14, 2012

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

Hi I am John MacPhee.

So….not sure how I ended up here. Paul seems to be very persuasive. I can never seem to get through a talk like this without ending in tears….so bear with me.

I’ve had 5 months to get this written…so naturally I just started it a few days ago. The good news (for me) is that it’s not a very difficult talk to give…and I’ve managed to cut it back to just 20 minutes.

I was looking to today’s reading and gospel for some inspiration…but…boy those are tough ones…I’ll leave those for Chris to tackle in a future year.

I was raised a catholic, in a very spiritual home my dad was very involved in the church. And because of that so were us kids… Sue and her family were raised Unitarian, her brother went on to become a Unitarian minister. But…neither one of us was practicing for a long stretch. After having Jack (our first child) we decided it was time to get back to church and bring god back in to our lives in a meaningful and regular way.

After some discussion we decided to give the Episcopalians a try…somewhere right in the middle of our upbringing. We joined St Andrews in Marblehead and after we gained an understanding of the church and its values, we decided this was going to work, and Jack was christened an Episcopalian.

So to stewardship… my thoughts on stewardship really come down to why we’re here in the first place.

Sue and I both worked when we moved to Bedford in 2000 having left our long commutes from the north shore for rural Bedford ……our old church was too far away to attend and we fell out of our church going rhythm for a bit as we settled in to town. But then along came Ian and we had a reason to get off our butt and find a new church.

We had a plan to church shop and set out one Sunday with our brood for St Paul’s, the first stop on our tour. Through some odd luck (hmmmm) we happened to pick a Family Service, how cool. So many kids! Jack went right up and sat on the alter with rest of the kids to hear the gospel and the discussion after. He fit right in. We were invited back for coffee hour, Jack was nowhere to be found…he had made some friends and was off. Sue and I were very excited to see some neighbors and so many of you approached us, welcomed us, and spent time talking with us. I think we were the last to leave coffee hour that week. We left feeling that we were done shopping, we had found our home…we’d be back again the next week.

Well we’re still here, we keep coming back and we added another cherub to our family, Sally, and have been growing them since. Sue, I and the kids have all grown with St Paul’s spiritually for us all and just plain “grown-up” for the kids. We’ve had the opportunity to participate at St Paul’s in so many ways, Sue ran the nursery for a bit I did a tour on the Vestry, the advent fair, rummage sale, men’s breakfast, the greening and un greening of the hall, the Christmas Pageant, pancakes and cheese heads, Out- reach and in reach I even get to participate in auditing the books once a year!

Here at St Paul’s there are plenty of ways to give of your time, talent and treasure, but many more ways to receive. I believe that god has always had and continues to have a guiding hand in all that I do, in my actions, in all the love and all the gifts and blessings I enjoy. But like many of you ,we get so busy in our lives that sometimes the peace of the Service is the only quiet reflection in our week, the weekly sermon the only opportunity to stop and reflect on god in our lives and perhaps glean a new perspective or thought that that we might not otherwise have the opportunity to enjoy. An opportunity to stop (or at least slow down) and reflect in our very busy lives.

We are all blessed by the community in this parish. The way everyone in this parish cares about each other, reaches out when we’re in need and even when we’re not. The capacity for love and caring is enormous. I honestly spend half of the services on the edge of tears, when the children choir sings, this kids bring their gifts to the alter, the kids on the alter...I gush when one of them is mine! The christenings, the Christmas pageant...I’ve got a list! These are all very moving to me….and god help me if anyone one of you brings out a shawl or a blanket…I’m done.

What else do we receive from St. Paul’s, really we only need to look to the Collect for St Paul’s it really nails it. Welcome, Comfort and Strength…I’ll add a few more community, spirituality, quiet, friendships, fellowship, giving back, teaching (for me and my kids), worship...again the list can keep going…and as I look out at you all this morning I’m reminded of a hundred more.

So what about Stewardship…when we joined this parish, St Paul’s had just finished a capital campaign, and was taking down the fund raising thermometer. Dodged a bullet there! It wasn’t till a year or so later that I learned about pledging….we were putting some money in the plate each Sunday but that was it. So we began pledging. Picking a random number we were comfortable with without really giving it a lot of thought.

It was probably six or seven years ago I got a fundraising note from a very good friend who was riding in the PMC and was soliciting pledges. Along with his heart felt thoughts with all the good reasons to give to cancer research…and he had plenty…we all have plenty…was a personal thought that he shared which struck a note with me. At the end of his appeal he told a brief story of when he was preparing his taxes the previous year, he got the part where you itemize your deductions, he got to the charitable contributions section and he had gathered up all of his documents , added them all up, put the number on his return and stopped and thought about it for a minute. The number nagged at him. He felt that there was a gap…a gap in the amount he had contributed to charities and the amount he had had earned in the year…and also a gap in how generous he was and how generous he THOUGHT he was. It was funning reading his words because as he laid it out like that I realized I had the same gap.

We certainly weren’t cheap, I don’t think there is a girl scout or boy scout that doesn’t have target on our door, we buy wreaths and cookies and popcorn, raffle tickets and spend money freely at the fairs we sponsor runners and walkers and riders, dancers and on! But we weren’t doing it in an organized fashion...and it didn’t add up to what it ought to have been.

We now have picked three organizations that mean a lot to us, and we contribute to those in a meaningful way and a thoughtful way. St Paul’s you won’t be surprised to learn is one of those that we have chosen to support in a meaningful way...St Paul’s is a place we feel that regardless of how much we give we get much, much more back in return. …. The scouts still have a target on our back and we continue to buy cookies and tickets and popcorn on and on.

Some fun facts about your pledge…none of it goes to Rome! In fact the Episcopal Church doesn’t even have a Rome. A very small portion is sent to the Boston Diocese to support larger mission/outreach projects in the greater Boston area and the Diocesan operations; the rest stays right here to run St. Paul’s. Staff salaries building upkeep, building operating expenses, outreach in reach etc… and all the programs we care about and enjoy so much.

I’ve got kind of a unique perspective how the church is run, with my back ground in finance, my time on the vestry, being part of several St Paul’s groups and being part of the audit team which scours the books every year. I can tell you there are a lot of amazing and talented folks giving of their heart and their time, there is no waste in our budget, a lot of thought is given to every expense and lots of energy is spent brainstorming ideas and executing on fundraising. This church is well run and I’m proud to be a part.

So…I’ll wrap up no and I’ll ask you to be thoughtful of your giving as we enter this Steward ship season and if you’re like me and my family regardless of how little or much we’re all able to give I still think we come out way ahead.

Thank you, Peace and love

Amen