**Lay Stewardship Sermon**

**St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA**

**Sunday, October 21, 2018**

**Mr. David Woodward**

May words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Good morning! My name is David Woodward. I live here in Bedford, I have two sons who live with me about half the time, and I work as financial consultant to universities. I have been attending St. Paul’s for most of the past ten years.

A few months ago, Paul asked if I would be willing to deliver the stewardship sermon. At first I was a little reluctant, but saying no to Paul is a bit like saying no to a boss or president, so my reluctance somehow came out as “sure, I’d be happy to.”

Since charitable giving is for each of us a personal matter, I thought for this morning that I would simply share with you the personal reasons I give to St. Paul’s with the hope that at least some of what I say will resonate with you and perhaps encourage you to participate in this year’s stewardship program.

As I start, I would ask that you call to mind an image that you’ve probably heard of. It’s the image of a group of people and all of them are wearing blindfolds and they are asked to stand around an elephant and reach out their hands and touch the elephant and tell everyone what they feel. Since the elephant is big and no one can see it, no one person really knows what they are touching. The idea is that by telling the group about the part of the elephant that they can touch, the group – together – can maybe figure out that they are in fact touching an elephant. For this morning, the elephant is God – something very large and very mysterious. All of us here this morning are standing around and touching this big mystery and I want to share with you two things I’m learning from the part of the mystery I can touch – my giving to St. Paul’s comes directly from these two things.

My faith journey starts pretty early in my life – at around age 12 I remember thinking often about the basic question Does God exist? The question seemed to be important, but frankly it was kind of annoying and I had no idea how to go about answering it. I remember one day walking in a shopping mall and coming up to a gumball machine that had only purple and orange gumballs. In search of an easy answer I said to myself, “If I get a purple gumball, then God exists, and if orange, then God does not exist.” So I put a dime in the machine, a purple gumball rolled out, I popped it in my mouth and went on my merry way.

Clearly a purple gumball was not a firm foundation for faith, but when I got to college

I had the opportunity to dive deeper through a major in Philosophy and Religion. And while the question “does God exist” persisted, it took on other forms such as “what is most real,” “how do I make sense of what I see and experience in my life or in the lives of others,” or more simply, “what in Sam Hill is going on?”

I would soon learn there were very different responses to these questions. Briefly, here are three. Nietzsche wrote a book titled the Geneology of Morals in which he explains away not only Christian faith but all notions of good and evil as human creations through history, and if you go back far enough, you’ll see that what is really going on here is self-interest or in his words “the will to power.” Thomas Hobbes developed a role for government from the premise that “the state of nature is a state of war” or maybe even more famously that in the end, “life is nasty, brutish, and short.” Finally, several more scientific thinkers continued to press the implications of a universe comprised fundamentally of atoms in motion that were governed by the laws of cause and effect. For most of these thinkers, there was no such thing as free will. Your freedom is an illusion – they would say. All of these thinkers were compelling – they were wicked smart and put forward serious, well-reasoned world views. But for all this fancy book learning, I was, basically, converted in a movie theater. The movie was Gandhi, which was of course based on true story. In the movie were scenes of people subjecting themselves to beatings and death. At first when I saw these scenes, I was angry, I wanted to stand in the theater and shout “you are being foolish – you have no reason to risk your lives!” – I was however deeply moved. There was something very real, very firm in what they were doing. I could neither explain it nor deny it despite all the assaults of reason I could muster. I began to believe that the protesters desire for liberty and their refusal to harm their oppressors was right because people, all people, had worth beyond measure. Dignity and justice were not human constructs as many philosophers proposed, these were not rights that we can choose to grant to people and just as easily choose to take away. Rather, dignity and justice were in the very fabric of creation, intrinsic to you and me and sustained by this thing, this very strange and mysterious God. Remember I am blindfolded as I try to tell you what I am touching, but behind this dignity and justice fundamentally – as best I can tell – is a love much greater than you or me that sustains us and makes us worthy – which leads me to the first thing I want to share with you – **God is love**.

As we all know, however, there are obstacles to faith – obstacles to believing that God exists or that God is love. Reason can be an obstacle – if you insist on finding an a+b+c = God, you will not find faith. Pride or self-interest can be an obstacle since faith can sometimes lead us to places we do not want to go. There is likely no greater obstacle, however, than suffering. I imagine Chris and Rachel must wrestle at times with how to communicate themes of our faith – how to ensure that we understand grace or forgiveness or even love – but not so with suffering. All of us know what it means to suffer. Some of you here have shared your experiences with the death of loved ones, addictions of family members, cancer and other serious illness, and even war. While these experiences may be hard for some of us to imagine, I strongly believe that each of us knows what it means to suffer.

For me, I have had many blessings in my life, I don’t need to look past Ben and Aaron to know that, but I’ve also had a loving family, friends since high school, financial security, and good health. But for reasons of both nature and nurture, by far, the dominant emotional state in my life has been fear - and its cousins, anxiety and low self-esteem. Fear was particularly pronounced and kept me cowed and isolated in my 20’s – it was a daily companion that along with the deprivations of sleep, friendship, and dating made for a very bleak decade. In my late 20’s, after a lot of prayer, some counseling, and hundreds of pages of journaling, I entered a program of psychoanalysis (I was on a couch three to four times a week for two years). There was marked improvement in my 30s and 40s, but fear remained a menace – like a headache that will not go away – and I often wondered if God would ever rid me of it. And while there were several reasons Mary and I had trouble in our marriage, my emotional challenges were certainly high on the list. The cumulative weight of fear over time, punctuated by divorce, was too much for me and – this obstacle – took my faith. I did not *choose* not to believe in God, I simply no longer did. I left St. Paul’s for about two years.

Ironically – very ironically - my time away from the church was possibly the best couple years of my life. Looking back, it was a period where this hot mess that was my emotional and spiritual life began to cool. And there were two major developments, both out of my control and both starting in the same month. One was a job that was a much better fit for me and where I could feel competent again. And the other was a woman – Vicki, who I trust completely and has made me happier than I thought was possible. But even more than a job and a relationship was a fundamental change. I am not asking you to understand or somehow agree with what I am about to say, I just need you to know that while life had once been a curse and was often a struggle, it is now for me, truly, a gift. My faith has returned - it is different now, I think it is both stronger and less intense. All of this brings me to the second thing I wanted to share with you as I touch this mystery – **God will act**. He may take a long time, he may seem to be slow and lumbering, but he is in the end faithful.

I give to St. Paul’s because I believe God exists, that he is love, and, now, that he will act. St. Paul’s proclaims God’s love and is literally a way for God to act. God can and does of course act on his own or through other institutions, but St. Paul’s, as a church, has a particular mission of reconciliation and healing. As I reflect on my time with St. Paul’s, several things stand out. This is a very active parish with many dedicated, even hardworking, parishioners. Not all of us are in positions to make such commitments or we choose to apply our energy to other equally good organizations – our schools, communities, or other volunteer programs – nevertheless, there is a lot going on here. There is, of course, the Sunday worship service and steady diet of very good preaching from Chris and Rachel which provides a sort of cornerstone for our life together, but we have also the Advent Fair, learning forums, St. Paul’s tonight, men’s breakfasts, mission trips to Haiti and Appalachia, women’s retreat, Catechesis, Sunday school and youth programs, the choir, the men’s retreat, a Lenten devotional series – last March Chris asked parishioners for reflections on their experiences of the risen Lord and 50 – **50!** – parishioners participated. Perhaps greatest of all, St. Paul’s is a caring church and many of us I know are grateful for the support and compassion we have received from many others here.

God is present in all the activity of this parish. But the ability for us a church to carry out these many ministries requires our support – to pay salaries, maintain the property, and sponsor programs and relief efforts. As a community of faith, we do not merely believe God exists or simply admire human dignity and justice. Rather we are **called** by this mystery to love actively – to strive for the dignity that all possess and the justice that all deserve. We are **called** to offer ourselves – our time, talents, and yes, our treasure – to bring healing and restoration to the places that are broken in our nation, our communities, our neighbors, and ourselves.

As we reflect on stewardship, I wanted to share some of my personal story and describe two things I touch as I stand near this mystery we call God. I know that I am not the only one saying God is love and God will act. Many of you here at St. Paul’s are saying similar things - and many more things. But each of us is blindfolded and can touch this mystery only in part. Please share your story (and maybe some of your income) and together we will grow as a community of faith … and in our shared understanding of this great and good God we worship.

Amen