



May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2010 - The Rev. Scott Pittendrigh  
Text: Acts 11:1-18  
First Sunday of Stewardship Campaign 2010

Nurturing God, your love is free,  
your compassion unconditional, and your mercy infinite.  
Open our lips, O Spirit, that we may proclaim  
your benevolent truth and your call for justice in our communities, in our congregations, and in our  
world.  
Amen.

5,000; 210,000, 300 million dollars, 25 billion dollars, 11, 16, 30, 25 million. Any idea what these numbers mean? This being the start of our month-long focus on stewardship, I thought I would begin by throwing some numbers at you. In case you were wondering if I am referring to our budget for this year, or worried that I may be referring to a deficit we are facing or even more worried that I am referring to what you will be asked to put on the collection plate, you can relax. But actually, you can't relax too much at all because when you find out more about these numbers they will not allow any of us to relax.

5,000 refers to the number of barrels of oil a day: Rate at which oil is currently leaking from the Deepwater Horizon rig in the Gulf of Mexico (and that equals 210, 000 gallons)— five times faster than was originally estimated. (Source: New York Times)  
\$300 million: Estimated cost to BP (in US dollars) to plug up the leaking oil spill, not including environmental clean-up costs. (Source: New York Times)  
\$25 billion: Loss of market value to BP stock since last week's rig explosion. (Source: Huffington Post).  
11: sadly refers to the eleven people who lost their lives when the oil rig explosion occurred.  
16: refers to the 16 miles off the coast of Louisiana the oil slick has now crept. (Source: New York Times)  
30: refers to the (at least) 30 species of birds the Audubon Society says are potentially threatened by the oil spill. These include marsh birds, ocean-dwelling birds, and migratory songbirds.  
Among the most vulnerable species is the brown pelican — the state bird of Louisiana — which was only recently removed from the endangered species list. The spill is especially devastating for bird populations because it coincides with the beginning of breeding season. (Source: Audubon Society)  
25 million: refers to the number of birds that traverse the Gulf Coast per day and which are potentially at risk from the oil spill. (Source: LA Times Greenspace blog)

As modern day followers of the rabbi from Nazareth, coming out on a Sunday morning in a very small part of the world for a church service, why should we care about these numbers and this event? I don't mean to be flippant. Of course we care, but should we care enough to let it seep in to what we are doing here this morning? Should we let the heavy, slippery, weight of concern we have about this, coat our consciences enough for us to bring it before God? Is the devastating oil spill that occurred this week in the Gulf of Mexico outside of holiness? After all, we have come here this morning to be inside of holiness. Where is the place where holiness and oil spills meet? Where is the place where what happens in here (our worship of God) affect anything that happens out there (our interaction with this world)?



Well, for me the answer to such questions is that if we find God here, we must find God out there – we must find God everywhere. If we believe that all we have been given – the resources of our earth and the resources of our lives – come from God’s abundant generosity and goodness, then we can’t separate ourselves from seeing God in all places and in all things. We can’t divide our reverence for the holy. I like how the Franciscan priest, Richard Rohr puts it: “Either you see the Body of Christ everywhere or you don’t see it at all. There are finally no divisions, except in our ability to see. This is a mystical and non-dualistic seeing that connects everything to everything. “There is one God from whom all things come and toward which we all go”, as St. Paul puts it.

God is perfectly hidden in this material world. And for those who have learned how to see, God is even more perfectly revealed. God shines through all things. You want to kiss trees and honour whatever is, even though you know most will mock or misunderstand. You are even brought to tears sometimes by the least of the brothers and sisters because the divine image shines through so clearly in those things that have no artificial glitter or self-evident glory. When you discover it on your own, it is like a secret revelation, and all the more beautiful.

We’ve got to give the material world back its power, its inherent importance, its Divine Indwelling, and its given sacredness. That’s why St. Francis wouldn’t step on a worm and fed the bees through the winter. We are learning to allow creation to be a subject and to let it speak its truth to us, while sometimes even receiving our truth, as any horse or dog lover fully understands. We cannot continue to objectify creation, or we ourselves become objectified in a short time. How you do anything is finally how you do everything.

This will lead to the beginnings of love, love for that tree, for that animal, for that flowing water, and shining sun. You wonder what this communion is that is passing back and forth between you sometimes, and you feel sorry for people who do not know such communion.”

“Not knowing such communion” is what can cause us to forget that we are stewards of all that we have been given -- from the earth that we live on to how we use our resources of time, talent, treasure, our faith, our prayers, and ultimately our lives. Not knowing such communion can cause us to forget to look for God everywhere and see that God’s circle is drawn wide enough to include everything from Creation itself to what we do with what we have been given. Not knowing such communion is when we draw a much smaller circle. A circle that excludes my concern for everything on the planet except the part of the earth I inhabit; a circle that is around only the people I associate with and happen to agree with; around the resources I have been given and keep to myself; around only what I think God has made holy (including people and religious denominations).

There is a great story in the Book of Acts today about this. It begins with Peter reporting to the church leaders in Jerusalem. It sounds as if he was being called on the carpet for breaking the rules. He had been eating with the “wrong” “the uncircumcised” or Gentiles. It was ultimately about who was “in” and who was “out”. In this case it was about the tension between those drawing a narrow circle of inclusion around the gospel and others who were busy expanding the circle until all God’s children had a place at the table.



Peter, apparently, has eaten with some Gentiles - the food the Gentiles would be eating would be forbidden to Peter by Jewish law, laws that had very detailed dietary laws, laws that centered on purity and impurity, cleanliness and uncleanness. So some of the circumcised believers, the ones who are following Jewish purity codes, want to know why Peter has eaten with these people. And so Peter must explain himself, "step by step," we read, and that is where he flashes back to describe what has caused this strange behaviour in him.

He's had a vision, he says. A large sheet, maybe like a giant tablecloth, was lowered from heaven by its corners. On the cloth were various kinds of animals, representing animals that Peter would not be allowed to eat according to Jewish laws, kosher laws. Surprising to him, he hears God's voice telling him to get up and eat these forbidden foods. Peter refuses, insisting he would not eat anything unclean. But God responds, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This sequence Peter saw repeated in his vision a total of three times.

Right after this happens, three men appear who are Gentiles, and Peter feels the Spirit telling him "not to make a distinction" between himself and these Gentiles. So he goes with them and has fellowship with them. In his heart, Peter finally understands his vision. Then he asks the profound question, "Who was I that I could hinder God?"

Think about the astonishing insight contained in that question. Who are we to try to limit the mission of God to redeem humanity? Every time we exclude someone from full participation in the redemptive efforts of God, Peter's question should trouble us and the church. Peter was persuaded that God the Creator did not intend to exclude anyone from the community of God's care. His conclusion was revolutionary.

This reading from Acts reminds us that we are to live open, inclusive, non-discriminatory lives – not separating animals or foods or people into "good" or "bad" but recognizing that all are created by God, and so are essentially blessed, holy, desired by God – and so should be cherished, revered and appreciated by us.

As a community I believe St. John's church has many strengths, and one of our strengths is that we strive to be a welcoming, diverse inclusive community – a community of compassion and hope. What do we mean when we say we are a community of compassion and hope? This small descriptive phrase appears on much of our communication materials – in the leaflet and the notices every Sunday, and on our website. What are we saying about who we are, and who we are striving to be, in this phrase?

Well, first of all, we are a community. Community is about belonging to something that is bigger than our families and our small circle of intimate friends. Community is about belonging to a group that is diverse – in age, political preference or ideology, theology, and interests. And in the midst of all of this diversity, a healthy community knows how to gather together and enjoy good times and good fun. Here at St. John's, we know how to do this. Whether it is during September Festival, which involves almost every member of our congregation for one day, or at annual events such as Robbie Burns Night, or our much anticipated Christmas pageant, we enjoy and appreciate the gift of community. During this Stewardship month I invite you to reflect on the gift of belonging to this community and how that gift is making a difference in your life. If you are new to St. John's I encourage you to come to the many



community gatherings we enjoy here at the church – from small study groups to celebrations to fundraising activities. Your life will be enriched by belonging to such a diverse and fun loving community.

But what kind of a community are we? We are a community of compassion and hope. What is compassion? Compassion is sharing, caring, giving, loving and serving. Compassion is forgiving and reconciling. Compassion is fairness, equity and fuels social justice. Compassion is generous without leading to co-dependency. Compassion includes the giving and accepting of forgiveness. A community of compassion embraces the new commandment Jesus gave us to “love one another”. “Just as I have loved you,” Jesus said, “you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Many parishioners here motivate themselves out of the spirit of compassion, and many acts of compassion have a spirit of quiet generosity about them. During this Stewardship month I invite you to reflect on how we are a community of compassion, and how you might want to continue to grow into becoming a more compassionate person.

So we are a community, a community that embraces compassion; and we are also a community that lives in “hope.” What do we include in this small but powerful word? Hope changes the world. Hope changes lives and transforms systems. Hope is the confidence and assurance that God’s grace is with us, that the compassion of Christ sustains us, and that the Holy Spirit leads us in this present day and in the days to come. Our search for spirituality is our search for hope. Our search for the Holy One is our search for hope. Here at St. John’s, we could not plan for next month or next year or the next decade without the powerful grace of hope. Hope allows us to plan budgets, hire staff, train and support volunteers in their ministries here at the church. Hope enables us to remain in dialogue with Anglican churches across Canada and around the world. Hope empowers us to be in respectful conversation with people from other religious traditions, and those who have none. Hope is sometimes a raging bonfire, and at other times a small candle burning in a window: light that pierces the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it. During this month of stewardship focus, I invite you to reflect on how we are a community of hope here in Cobble Hill – for each other, for our neighbours, and for people who live in other parts of the world. Hope enables us to pay for the salary of a nurse in Kenya – our hope sustains her in her hope as she cares for the people in her life. Together we can sustain and support each other – especially when we are going through times of struggle or sadness or loneliness or fear. How are we people of hope, and how might you allow the grace of hope to further inspire and nourish your life?

As you walked into the church this morning I hope you were able to pick up an envelope that was prepared by me and the Stewardship committee. I strongly encourage you to take the next four weeks to reflect on this invitation that we have all received to be faithful and responsible stewards of all that we have been given – our fragile planet, our local communities, our family and friends, and our church family here at St. John’s and the resources we have to give to this community of compassion and hope. In my letter to you I begin with a quote that I really like, written by Kay Sprinkel Grace. She writes: “A donation to a non-profit organization is an investment in the community the organization serves. Donors do not give because organizations have needs. They give because organizations meet needs.” Well, our “organization” meets needs by drawing our circle wide enough to be stewards of creation – including this beautiful earth and all God has given us; I ask that you please read the enclosed information and reflect on how you benefit from being part of a community of compassion and hope. And then I invite you to consider what you can do to ensure that we remain this kind of community as we grow into the hub church for the South Cowichan region. Like Peter, we are called to wonder - who are we to hinder





God? What God has made clean, we are called to love and cherish. So today I invite you to look around your church family. Who is here? Who needs still to be invited in? Who in your church family needs to know that you share in Christ's Body with them? Who needs to know that they are welcome?

We have been so richly blessed by our generous God. And I encourage us to respond with great generosity – by sharing our time, our many gifts, skills and talents, and our treasure with each other, with this parish and with our world. Amen.

