

Pledging our allegiance

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Edson in The Episcopal Parish of Saint John the Evangelist, Hingham, Massachusetts, on the Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, October 22, 2023.

Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's.

Matthew 22:21

Jesus' detractors are constantly trying to entrap him. They want to see if he has a conflict having allegiances to both his Jewish faith and the Roman authorities.

Jesus knows better than to allow himself to be put into a bind. He shows them a coin with the image of the emperor on it and explains that the coin being used to pay taxes to the emperor does not conflict with religious tradition. He makes clear that what we give to the government belongs to the government and what we give to God belongs to God.

The duality of our existence is that we live under secular authority while honoring the sacred authority of God as the source of all we have. We have a combined allegiance to both the sacred and secular realms in which we live.

In our wallet are images on our currency of historic Americans such as Washington, Lincoln, Jefferson, and Jackson. In our heart we are marked with the image of Christ that makes us his own forever. Neither our American citizenship nor our Christian citizenship are compromised.

What we believe as Christians gives us a perspective to what is going on in the daily lives. Our Christian moral and ethical convictions apply to all aspects of our lives from what we report on our tax returns to what we pledge and put in the offering plate.

Our dual citizenships as Christians and as Americans are bound together.

Therefore, our ongoing allegiance to God intertwines faith and morality with society and politics.

For example, the issues of prayer in public schools, civil rights, voting rights, abortion, war, capital punishment, racial and economic justice, immigration, and book banning reach across moral, ethical, and political lines and cannot be isolated.

If you look at a chart showing our skeletal, vascular, and nervous systems you realize what an amazing and complicated network the human body has with all those systems interacting with each other.

In the same way, in the complicated network of our secular and spiritual lives our heart is linked with our bank account and all we acquire.

We are stewards of what God has given us. Just as stewards on a ship and flight attendants on an airplane are responsible for the provisions during the journey, we are stewards of our resources in our life journey.

Our spiritual provisions include the gifts of our time, our talent, our abilities, and our finances.

Our pledge of support to the parish helps to maintain our on-going programs of worship, Christian formation, and outreach programs.

When you think about it, you take part in worship and Christian formation, you have baptisms, weddings, and funerals, hospitality, and effective outreach programs.

You are provided with pastoral care when you are ill or are grieving and counseling without regard to your ability to pay.

Your children are provided with teachers for Christian education, though you aren't sent a bill for tuition.

No one knows what you give in support of the work of the church's ministry.

Next year, when you prepare your records for filing your income tax, look at what you give for charitable purposes. Measure that by the biblical standard of tithing or ten percent of your income.

To build a budget each year, the church depends on our pledging a percentage of what we have. It is essential that our mission determines the budget and not the other way around.

We can give grudgingly out of duty, or we can give cheerfully out of gratitude for all we have.

Brad Galko:

For those of you who don't know me, I'm Brad Galko and, for the past 5+ years, I have been the Chair of the Finance Committee for St. Johns.

I realize I am the third lay person to preach from this pulpit in about as many weeks, and we've heard the likes of Dave Clinton and Kenzie Blackwell deliver truly powerful, emotional and deeply personal testimonies. So I want to get this out up front: as the "finance guy," this will not be that.

Instead, I speak to you this morning to outline the significant challenge, financially, that we face as a parish in 2024 and to ask you to join me in rising to that challenge.

Now 2023 has also been financially challenging, in its own way, but by going without a rector (interim or otherwise) for 1/2 year, and renting out the Rectory for extra income, we've patched it together.

In 2024, however, our prayers for a new permanent rector will hopefully be answered. And this — when combined with the loss of income from the Rectory, and continued inflation in utilities, maintenance services, insurance, and the other overhead costs of the church — means that we face the potential — *potential* — of a six-figure budget gap in our operating budget for 2024.

Lest you draw the wrong conclusion from what I just said, I want to be clear about something: Our operating expenses, as a parish, over the next three years (that is, 2022 through 2025) are expected to grow at just over 3% annually. That is less than the current rate of inflation.

We do not have an over-spending problem, in my estimation. The simple fact is the combination of a global pandemic coupled with the untimely departure of a long-time, well-liked rector was

one-two punch that caused us, as a parish, to lose our financial footing for a minute. Such that Stewardship today remains below 2019's pre-pandemic levels.

To make this somewhat more relatable:

In 2024, the annual operating costs of the parish will amount to around \$5,000 per current pledging household unit. Our average pledge, however, is about \$3,000. We have other sources of income that bridge about half of that gap. But, as Robert said, if we want the budget to meet with mission and not the other way around, we will need a combination of dozens of new pledges and/or a 25% increase in the average pledge at St. Johns.

That is a big lift — and I am not here this morning to minimize that in any way.

On the other hand, however, as I look around today, we have more energy at St. Johns — led by our clergy and our great lay leadership — than we've had at any time since before the pandemic. Witness the highly-successful Not-So-Spooky-Haunted House just finished.

And you heard last week that we have a 100% participation rate in this year's Stewardship Campaign from your vestry. This morning I can tell you we have a comparably high participation from our Ministry Leaders; that is, the 48 people sitting amongst us today that have taken on leadership of the parish's many ministries for this year.

So we have incredible momentum, *and that should not be discounted.*

For Cynthia and me, St. Johns has long been our #1 charitable giving beneficiary. By meeting the 25% challenge, as we have chosen to do for this year, it now remains #1 by an even wider margin. I hope that you will also consider making St. Johns your #1 for 2024. And to those whom have never pledged before, I invite you to take this most opportune time to make the leap.

Last Tuesday, I briefed the vestry on this significant financial challenge we collectively face in 2024. It was not a fun conversation for anyone on either side of the table, as you can imagine. At the end, I asked for their input on what I should say to the congregation today. They said, "be transparent," and so I've tried to be very honest this morning – brutally honest, perhaps – about the challenge we all face as a parish.

Then Jody, being Jody, said "Tell them your story. Tell them why you took this job!"

As I was sitting there, facing the prospect of proposing cuts to popular ministries this budget season, in the back of my mind I'm thinking *I have no idea why I ever took this job.* But Jody's prompt got me thinking, as it has been five years in this role: *How was it that I came to take the finance role?*

As I thought about it, it occurred to me that the answer is rather elemental: I was asked. My heart was open, to be sure, but Rob Hess came to me and ASKED me to do the job. And in doing so, he said three words to me: "We need you."

And so this morning, I am hoping – praying, really – to recapture some of that serendipitous magic: I'm ASKING, I am ASKING you to join me in making a significant increase in your financial commitment to St Johns this year. And to those of you who have never made a financial commitment to St. Johns, I am asking you to so. Because *we need you. We. Need. You.* And I am hoping that your hearts will be open to the call like mine was that day five years ago.

ROBERT:

I believe that all we have is from God and I want to give a portion of what I have for God's work. With all its flaws and shortcomings, Christ and his church have always been the very center of my life.

We are more than an institution, more than an organization, more than a business. We are a living, vibrant intergenerational community who believe in and live the example of Christ.

The choice is ours to make a commitment:

now is the time,
this is the place,
and **you and I** are the ones.

