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Proper 23 A

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Love is an Action Word

This morning Kenzie and I will begin St. John's stewardship season by talking about how we developed our own sense of what wealth means. When I was a girl, my own ideas about what wealth were not fancy or extravagant, but fairly practical and down to earth. I grew up in a rural community where my neighbors lived in tar paper shacks or cabins or shells of buildings which were not really roughed in or finished off. The kids in my neighborhood often went barefoot in the summer because there was no money for shoes. Everyone was struggling, struggling to get by, yet most folks thought of my family as being rich.

You see, we had a concrete block house that was painted on the outside and had cedar trim. But behind the doors of the house lay the reality that, for the first couple of years we lived there, we could walk through the studs of the walls not covered by cardboard boxes, studs which one day would sport interior walls. The floors were concrete before that was an "in" thing, and mother had set up kitchen cabinets made out of 1x8's held up by concrete blocks turned on their ends. Little by little my parents hung up paneling, put down flooring, and made the house livable. But it was never finished, not really, during my 9 years of living there.

We dressed well by the standards of the neighborhood. A new pair of shoes every fall; flip-flops every summer. We learned to sew and were allowed fabric for 3 new dresses for the start of school each year. Sometimes, come Easter, we would get fabric for new dresses and mom would see that we got new sandals—what a treat.

Anyway, everyone thought we were a together family, that we had it made, that we had hit the big time. My daddy nearly always had a job, credit manager at Sears and then store manager for Kress's. Still, we struggled. We understood that if we wanted something, we had to be sure what we already had was completely worn out before we dared ask for a replacement. But, we were well fed, happy, healthy kids.

In those days I thought wealth was something along the lines of having a house that was finished inside, having a real door to close on the bathroom, having concrete walls properly sealed so that I did not have to periodically scrub the mildew out of the corners. I thought wealth was having shoes to match pretty dresses, (don't laugh) –a wig to wear on a Saturday night, shorty pajamas with lace sewn onto the top. To be honest, when I was 15, I bought a pair of mail-order

navy-blue Maryjane shoes with my first pay check, shoes which I wore until I met Brad at college—4 years later.

Even in those days when money was scarce, it never struck me that money should be stored away or hoarded. Money was a source of joy, and joy should always be shared. I would save some of my lunch money so my sister and I could stop by Burger Chef on the way home and get a small burger and coke to share—cost \$.25.

I remember dreams, daydreams, of putting shoes on the feet of Diana Rebecca Gowishyou Phillips, the little girl down the street I loved to tote around on my hip. I remember thinking, if I just had money enough, I could make sure that the Phillips and Williamsons had food on their table every night. I knew they were hungry by the way they snatched up food when my mother would invite them to our house for dinner. Often by the time their plates were helped, there was little left for my family to share. In those days, guests always went first. Somehow, I thought that if I had money enough I could make lives easier, not just mine, but all those people I knew and loved.

And, my friends, I think back on those times and realize that by comparison with how so many in our world currently live, we are so richly blessed. I have a roof over my head, food in my pantry, clothes in my closet, family and friends whom I love and believe they love me. No bombs are bursting outside of my windows. If I make a purchase, I can usually do it without worrying or feeling like I am making a compromise. I am beyond wealthy according to the terms as defined in my childhood.

Kenzie.....

Thank you for taking the time to listen this morning. We all know that it takes our donation dollars to keep the lights on, but stewardship is much more than writing a check to me. Today I want to talk to you about a different layer of stewardship, *the one that keeps our spiritual lights on.*

Our family moved to Hingham in 2018. We had previously lived in Quincy, so we knew what a wonderful town this would be for commuting and raising our children. Soon after we were settled, we started to look for a church to call home.

As luck would have it, the group from ASP had recently returned and the congregation was abuzz about their experience. I was listening.

Most of you know I “ain’t from these parts” but what most of you don’t know is that I grew up with Appalachian poverty all around me. My hometown might be the same one as one certain country legend, but the poverty she so skillfully illustrates in lyrics is so much more than a pretty song. It is still very much alive. My formative years were spent with friends whose families look very much like those here in Hingham. I also had many friends who only ate at school, who faced horrific living conditions and who shared unspeakable occurrences of abuse and neglect.

And, you know what, we all sat around the same table. It was a lunch table, but those years of cafeteria conversations created a very deep understanding of how circumstance can impact a life. Some of us would go on to college. Some of us would be pregnant and married before high school was done. Some of us would move away. Some of us would retreat back into the hills into the same cycle of desperate poverty that disproportionately impacts women. Some of us would become accomplished professionals. Some of us would become part of the opioid epidemic and not make it to 30.

What struck me about St. John's was that you invited these same folks around the table too. When I listened to stories about your ASP experiences, they weren't ones of heroic service. You were humble. You were servants. You gave without condition. You were active stewards of our faith.

I knew we had found home.

You then invited me, a relative newcomer, to sit at your table. And THEN you said yes to this crazy idea I had to start a new ministry. And you let me work. And you joined the work...and together we have created something quite special.

I also know that this kind of stewardship is hard. It's labor intensive, it's uncomfortable, it's messy. *It's also expensive.* But I see it as an investment. We are investing collective energies, in whatever form each can give, to extend God's love in radical ways. This is an investment in our neighbors, who often become our friends, and who we hope will want to sit in the spaces we always hold open at our table.

In this new home our family found a congregation living my favorite quote, *Love is an Action Word*. This kind of stewardship is some of the greatest work we can do with the time given on this earth. ***We are lucky to have found you.***

Community service, or the term we use here “Outreach” keeps my spiritual lights on. I want to ask you, ***what about St. John’s keeps your spiritual lights on?***

Meg.....

We at St. John’s are wealthy in so many ways. Our wealth is found in one another, in the relationships that we have developed, in our family and friends and worship community, in the ministries in which we participate. Our wealth is not just money (although we are pleased that the vestry has already 100% pledged to our 2024 budget and hopes all of do likewise), it is the very essence of who we are and the gifts we have received and the gifts that we share. As we enter this season of stewardship, let’s remember those blessings, let’s dress up and come to the banquet, let’s bring our gifts of time and talent and treasure with us to share, let’s bring our spiritual lights—our love-- into the world. Amen.

