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Proper 24A
St. Margaret's Church
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This is my favorite time of year. The cool crisp air, the amazing clear evening skies. The pumpkins, corn stalks, and chrysanthemums. The warm fragrance of apple cider, fires burning in the den, and the smell that your heater in your car makes when you first turn it on. The fall TV lineup, good old scary Halloween movies, and watching your favorite football team play on national television. And then there is the feel of crunching leaves under your feet as you walk to the mailbox. You get excited about the new L.L. Bean catalog that arrives in the mail and start thinking about your Christmas list.

And then there is that one envelope that arrives that you're not so excited about opening. No, it's not another bill or even a reminder about your upcoming dentist appointment. It's not the statement from your 401(k) or investment banker that says you owe a lot less to Uncle Sam than you did last year. No, it looks like, it feels like, it smells like, it must be. It must be that time of year again. Yes, the S-word. STEWARDSHIP! Don't you just love this time of year?

I had a Sunday school teacher in the seventh grade who taught me a great deal about stewardship. Her name was Mrs. Cheshire and she is still a member of my home parish, St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Macon, Georgia. She always had a great way of bringing us into the stories of the Bible, and teaching us the Parable of the Talents was no exception. At the end of one of our classes, she gave us all envelopes with ten dollars in each one of them. She told us that in one month we would meet again and talk about what we had done with the money. Well, as she had said, we came back in a month with our proceeds, or lack thereof. Some of us had actually prospered. Some of us made arts and crafts and sold them, some of us bought rakes and did yard work, and some of us baked goodies to sell at coffee hour. A few of us had made close to a hundred dollars. Some of us were not so successful and only hit about 50 dollars. Some of us brought back ten dollars that our parents had given us to save face since we had already spent it all. Some of us didn't even show up on that last Sunday. I will never forget what I learned from that exercise. Some of us took great risks with what we had been given, and some did not, but we all had to answer Mrs. Cheshire's question, "What did you do with what you were given?"

I can still hear her asking me that question. I think about her every time I write a check to the church or fill out my pledge card for the year. But that exercise wasn't the only way that Mrs. Cheshire taught me about stewardship. She was and still is one of those people who I always knew supported me. She didn't care one bit what we did with our ten dollars. She loved those of us who made 100 dollars as much as she loved those who didn't even come back to Sunday school. She always believed in me and supported me in whatever I would decide to do in my life. Mrs. Cheshire had confidence in me.

And I also learned about stewardship from my parents. Every Saturday my maternal grandmother would come to the house for lunch. She always gave me and my brother a dollar for our allowance and a stick of Wrigley's Spearmint gum. That dollar wouldn't go very far, but I saved every penny I could find. And every Saturday night my father would get out his checkbook and his offering envelopes and I would sit at the table with him with my offering

envelopes. By then I would have somehow made change. I got out my pencil and wrote my name and 10 cents on the envelope. I'm sure the envelopes and tape probably cost more than my offering. But it was the lesson that my parents taught me. From what I had been given, much was required.

I learn about stewardship from reading the Bible. From the many parables Jesus used to teach his disciples and from his response this morning to the Pharisees who were trying to trick him. Give whatever you must to the emperor, but give to God what is God's. Everything is God's. And if we are God's and made in God's image, then we must render our thanks to God not only with our time and our talent but with our treasure as well.

I also learn about stewardship through my ministry here among you at St. Margaret's. I am a relatively new person to this community, but in a year and a half, I have built up a great deal of confidence in our parish because I see people truly care about people. People count here because we're a community and congregation that is concerned about the spiritual longings of folks. We take those longings seriously, and we struggle with them together. We spend our time studying the Bible and teaching our children and talking about the difficult questions of faith. We help each other along the journey to find the truth.

I learn about stewardship as I see people reach out and care for those who are hurting next to us in the pews. We pray for one another in our own times of crisis and celebrate those occasions of great joy.

I learn about stewardship as I see people give of their time and talent and treasure to those in the world who are in great need. The Missions Commission and others support the Lighthouse Shelter which helps more people than we can even imagine. We strive to speak to the real needs of our neighbors while seeking justice and peace. We seek to uphold the dignity and worth of every human being, and we pray every for an end to violence and the beginning of peace in the world.

We know that people matter. Whether you're a descendant of one of the founding members of this parish or whether you're a newcomer visiting for the first time, you matter here. That's just one of the ways I see stewardship alive and well at St. Margaret's Church.

I am also inspired by the stewardship of other people. Thanks to a bequest from the estate of Ed and Zoe Hall, we have an endowment of over four million dollars that has enabled us to distribute grants of over a million dollars around the world. And thanks to another recent bequest, the vestry has invested in portable classrooms that will arrive on campus this week. Those new classrooms will enable us to continue the high level of Christian formation for all ages here. Those people had faith and hope and love for St. Margaret's, and their amazing generosity continues to enable us to grow in ministry.

And so we come to Paul's letter to the church at Thessalonica. Paul always begins his letters by stating that he prays regularly for them and thanks God for their presence in his life. And in today's Epistle reading we hear Paul saying to the Thessalonians that he has confidence

in them. He is grateful for their work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

The church at Thessalonica was small, very small, and they were being persecuted left and right. They had absolutely nothing going for them. Paul had to get out of there because the authorities were after him. The odds seemed to be stacked up against this tiny church, and then they read Paul's letter.

Now St. Margaret's is not turning into the church at Thessalonica. Rather, as we look forward over the next few months and years and see all of the opportunities and possibilities ahead, I think we should be encouraged. Just like Mrs. Cheshire and my parents and Paul, I believe in each one of us and in what we can do together as a congregation. I have faith in our work and labors of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ

But enough of my ramblings about how great St. Margaret's Church is. I could talk all day about the abundance of gifts here among us. That is not the point of my sermon and it was not the point of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. Rather, Paul stated that his hope and confidence was founded on something completely different.

"Paul had confidence in that little church not because they were strong and good, but because *God* is strong and good. Paul believed that that little struggling congregation facing enormous obstacles and persecutions, nevertheless was doing God's work in the world. He had confidence in them not because they were accomplished or strong or full of human resources or all of those things—after all, they didn't have all the programs that we have—but they were doing God's work in the world, in that time. Saint Paul's confidence then was not so much in the strength or power of the congregation to which he wrote, but it was rather a confidence rooted in his faith in God."¹

My friends, God is at work here among us. Like the Thessalonians, we have been chosen by God to do his work in the world. We are called to continue to give of our time and talent and treasure because we have faith that others have done it before. We have a hope in the everlasting life to come and a hope of reaching out to even more people in our community. And we have a common bond in our prayer and worship and song together, and that love knows no bounds.

So when you go to fill out that pledge card and talk to your children about pledging, and when you come to church next Sunday, I hope you will reflect on God's confidence in our community and the gifts that have been sown here. Reflect on how we gather to sing praise to God, and give thanks to God for the abundant blessings that we have been given. And as long as we continue to do God's work in the world, God will continue to have confidence in us. God will be with us and work through us and will bless what we do, and because of that, we should have a confidence that is unshakable.

¹ Schenck, Carl. Quoted in *Lectionary Homiletics* – November 2001 page 17.