

<i>Date Preached</i>	03-Oct-2021	<i>Date Initiated</i>	21-Sept-2021
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	Prop 22, Yr B

" People were bringing little children to Jesus in order that He might touch them. ...
He took them up in His arms, laid His hands on them, and blessed them. "



Well, allow me to be the first to say it: Stewardship season has officially started. The kick-off letter from the Stewardship Commission will soon be landing in your mailbox, if it hasn't already. I realize many priests *dread* stewardship season, but whether in the ignorance of my inexperience ... or from my passion for embodied faith—for showing forth Jesus not only with our lips but also in our lives¹ ... I actually have been looking forward to it! For it is a time when we, as a family—a family that's both chosen one another *and* been chosen by God—ponder. As a family, we ponder our ministry within these walls, and we ponder our mission across the community and the world. As a family, we ponder both the hold Christ has on us ... and what His ownership of us ↓ liberates us to accomplish.

The Stewardship Commission selected our parish's being a family as the theme of this year's appeal. Now, it's hard to say exactly what a family *is*, isn't it? Families ... whether they be of birth, marriage, adoption, proximity or choice ... come in shapes, sizes and compositions that defy any universal definition. But whatever a family *is*, every family, in some way, *does* the same three things: It care. It loves. And it hopes. Which is to say, a family nurtures and provides for its members. And it also exceeds this basic care, to help its members flourish and thrive. And, a family hopes: setting its expectations and dreaming its dreams.

Over the next few weeks, we're going to explore how *our* family—our *parish* family—does each of these things: care, love, hope. And we're also going to imagine how our generous stewardship ... our thoughtful, Christ-oriented giving ... will allow us to do them even more ... and even better ... than we do now.

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This week, we begin with the most basic thing a family does: caring for one another. I must, as I begin, acknowledge that not all families can (or choose to) provide for their members' needs, and this is tragic. The norm, however, is that a family looks after the basic material, social and emotional needs of its members. Parents feed, clothe and educate children—roles that may eventually reverse as parents grow older. Siblings play with, teach and stick up for each other. A mother comforts her child; a child looks up to his father; a spouse encourages her partner.

And when we think of it, the care we provide one another as members of the St Andrew's family isn't that much different, is it? Whether we've lived in or around Kent all our lives or just arrived ... whether our St Andrew's lineage goes back for generations or a few months ... whether we're an 8:30 person or a 10:30 person or an as-the-Spirit-moves-me person ... regardless of *any* of

¹ See The General Thanksgiving, BCP, p 101.

that ... we belong to this parish family. And as a family, we continuously and conscientiously look after one another's needs:

- At a **pragmatic** level, we provide and maintain physical spaces in which to worship and gather and learn; we hire staff to perform some of the specific tasks we need done; we pay for utilities, maintenance and supplies.
- In the **fellowship** Christ teaches us, we greet one another at coffee hour; we bring flowers and soup when someone is sick; we visit the homebound; we gather around tables for simple potlucks and mark special events in our family's life with festive celebrations.
- Supporting one another in our journeys as **disciples**, we teach one another ... and allow ourselves to be taught; we pray for one another ... and make ourselves vulnerable by asking for prayer; we volunteer for jobs we love and some we don't ... and show our gratitude when others do likewise.
- And **sacramentally**, we fill one another's lives with grace: we welcome in baptism and affirm in confirmation; we feed in Eucharist; we join in marriage; we bless in the laying on of hands; and we sing the Alleluia of resurrection in death.

Some people look at a parish and see a business: buildings, systems and budgets. Others see something like a spiritual snack bar: a place to stop in and nibble when we're peckish. Still others see a philanthropic society: a place that does good works, because that's what Jesus told us to do. None of those images is invalid, but, in my view, all of them miss the most fundamental identity of a parish: a family—a family that willingly ... gladly ... and sometimes messily ... cares for and supports one another.² Regardless of what family or families any one of us may be part of outside these walls ... in St Andrew's, *all* of us have a place to come to for solace *and* for strength; for pardon *and* for renewal.³ Whatever material, cultural, emotional and spiritual resources we may have, or may lack, 'out there' ... in *here*, we feed and nurture and connect one another to Christ. Whether we are bursting with hope or stricken by anxiety ... whether this season of our lives is the bright summer of joy or the dark winter of grief ... we know that here, in our parish family, we will receive the care and support we need, when we need it, and we also provide the same to others when we have it within us. For such is the give-and-take of family life.

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It is ironic—perhaps bordering on tone-deaf—for me to preach on the mutual care and support of family when the subject of today's gospel lesson is divorce and Jesus' words seem harsh.⁴

² In other times, the church parish was a more fundamental unit of wider society. A parish was not a collection of people who regularly attended services in the same church. Rather, it was *all* of the people who lived in one geographic area; and the church, through its people and clergy, had responsibility for the physical, social and spiritual welfare of those people. This is a model not entirely unknown in the modern West, but one that is more frequently spoken of than lived out. I wonder how the Town of Kent might be transformed if St Andrew's came to see the entire community as St Andrew's parish.

³ See Eucharistic Prayer C, BCP, p 372.

⁴ As I alluded to on a Sunday of a baptism when the appointed gospel lesson was the beheading of St John the Baptist: The downside of following a lectionary (and there are many *more* upsides!) is that lessons come at you—however

As I explained in Friday's EPISTLE, Jesus refuses to be drawn into the pharisees' legalistic fly-specking about divorce.⁵ Instead, He emphasizes God's purpose in *ordaining* marriage: stability, companionship, mutuality, community, care. God asks our commitment in the sacrament of marriage because of the 'goods' that flow, normatively, from life in family. Jesus doesn't outlaw the dissolution of family, but He does dwell on the sacred nature of family commitment.

It is a similar sacred family commitment that we're asked to honor each year during stewardship season. Being united, as a parish ... as a family ... to one another, in Christ's name and with His blessing, we have made mutual commitments of care and support, of community and aid. Much of that care is intangible ... but some of the support we provide one another requires **tangibles** that cost money. Our existence as a community of Christ is spiritual ... but the mutual aid we give one another is involves the **material**: It happens in buildings to be maintained; requires staff who are compensated; and consumes everything from paper towels and fire extinguishers ... to photocopiers and insurance coverage. Your pledge to St Andrew's is both a tangible *and* a spiritual way of honoring the commitments we've made to one another; of perpetuating the 'goods' that flow from our life as a family of Christ.

Therefore, this stewardship season, I invite you to consider, thoughtfully and prayerfully, the commitment the St Andrew's family has made to you ... and you to it; and to pledge an amount that bespeaks all the care you receive ... and all the care you are able to give.



*The Rev Douglas S Worthington
St Andrew's Parish
Kent, CT*

uncomfortably, sometimes—whether or not they 'fit' the preacher's message. This often means that her message needs to change, for God has something else that needs saying!

⁵ This was an era when pre-arranged marriages dominated Jewish society. Many failed and ended in divorce.