

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Our lessons today speak to us of trust.

Trust in God.

Of putting our whole trust in God.

In our reading from Ruth,

Ruth places her whole trust in God,

Following her mother-in-law into a foreign and hostile land,
prepared even to die as a result.

Naomi also trusts in God,

leading Ruth into a relationship with Boaz

that will one day give rise to the prophesied King of Israel, David.

In the Gospel,

Jesus holds up as a model, the faith and trust of the widow

who gives all that she has to live on, the widow's mite,

relying completely on God for her living in the days ahead.

It is stewardship time in the church.

And it is no small accident, I am sure,

that these lessons were chosen by the church to be heard at this time.

There is a little something for everyone.

Let us not forget, I certainly do not,

the warning to the clergy about getting too big for their britches..er robes.

The warning to remember the trust placed in them by the community.

And there is more.

To all of us, I'm sure,

it is a bit disconcerting to realize

that Jesus likes to sit around during the offertory

and watch what people,

People like you and me,
put in the plate.

And it is even more disconcerting to realize,
that unlike everybody else in the room,
Jesus knows exactly what we make.

It would be nice to think that Jesus doesn't really care about money, but he does.
Jesus speaks more about money than any other topic!
He does this because he knows how much we think about it.

How much it can distract us from what is really important if we let it.
How much it can undermine our faith; our trust.

Maybe that is why our founding fathers
put the words "In God We Trust" on our money,
to constantly remind us not to trust in our money.

Every so often the church passes a resolution to remind us
that the tithe is the minimum standard of giving in the Episcopal Church.
I have not reviewed the minutes of the Diocese of Missouri
to find when the last time a resolution like this was passed here,
but I have no doubt it has occurred.

There are some who may not know what the tithe is,
and may think it is merely the "churchy" name for what we donate,
Like the undercroft is the "churchy" name for basement,
and so I suppose I should explain a bit.

When the Hebrew people first came into the promised land,
they were commanded by God, among other things,
to give a tithe of the first fruits of the harvest to the temple
as a sacrifice of thanksgiving,
and they were commanded not to harvest the fields all the way to the edge,
to leave the gleanings
for the poor, and the visitors, and the outlanders.

The modern understanding of the tithe is 10% of what we earn.

We can argue about whether that 10% is before or after taxes,
but when we do that we miss the point.

The heart of the tithe is generosity
and living our lives out of the abundance of God.

There are some who think the tithe is outmoded,
that it doesn't make sense in the modern world.

They are wrong.

The tithe is more important now than it has ever been in the past
for the same reason that we put "In God We Trust" on our money.

We live in the richest country in the world.

That is not a bad thing,

but it does mean that we are more at risk
to be distracted and enthralled by the power of money
than anybody else in the world.

What it really boils down to is, I think,

if you can't give away 10%
of the money that you have earned with the sweat of your brow,
then you have more faith in money than in God.

I know that sounds harsh, but it is the truth.

I believe in tithing and I believe that everyone in the church should tithe.

Everyone.

If you are not tithing

I expect you to make a meaningful step in that direction every year
until you get there. Every year. Even this year.

I can assure you

that tithing is an important spiritual discipline.

Except in the most unusual of circumstances,
it is a major contributor to the giver's spiritual health and inner joy.

Hear that again.

Tithing is not the *result* of spiritual health and inner joy,

but a major *contributor* to the giver's spiritual health and inner joy.

I know that this sermon is making many of us uncomfortable.

I would be lying if I didn't say it made me uncomfortable.

But it makes me uncomfortable

for a different reason than it makes you uncomfortable, I suspect.

It makes me uncomfortable

because I know some of you will think I am talking about money.

What I am talking about is faith.

In this time of pandemic when a financial crisis comes along with the medical one,

we have been forced to let go of much of our dependence on money.

For many of us that has been difficult and stressful.

We must take great care

not to let the fear that surrounds us

infect our faith, our real faith.

We must remember again that faith in money

is faith in an empty idol, a false god.

That putting our faith in money undermines our faith in God.

It cripples our generosity;

yes our generosity with money,

but even more our generosity of spirit.

It increases our fear and drains our hope.

It is the reason why idolatry makes it all the way to number two

on the top ten list of don'ts.

Today we are starting up our stewardship pledge drive.

I ask you to stop by the table at the back of the church

and pick up your packet, if you haven't already.

I want to say that I am proud of the continuing level of generosity

that Grace has shown throughout the pandemic.

Many churches and non-profit organizations have struggled during this time.

Though we have been careful with our funds, to be sure,

we have never struggled.

During the month of September was the first time

that our income fell below our expenses.

Though this is certainly something to watch,

it is no worse than a normal year

when income drops during the summer and fall

and then we get caught up in December.

I don't have to tell you that this is a year unlike any other,

so we will be watching, but we won't be afraid.

As we look to the year ahead

we have many projects that will demand our time and our money.

Some are funded already,

and others will wait for your generosity to fund.

As examples, we have two building projects

involving the exterior and the interior of the bell tower.

At the same time we expect that the needs of the community

will be rising and not falling.

All of this will require both our time and our money.

For some, these growing needs may lead to feelings of anxiety.

In these times of anxiety it helps to remember

that we are different from other non-profit organizations...

that we are a church.

Like Ruth, going to a foreign land we must remember

that God will provide.

God always has and always will

when we put our trust in God

and give our best to do God's will.

We must have faith that God is with us in this process;

That God is in the midst of us,

teaching us,

watching us,

leading us.

It is time to make a real step forward in faith

and choose to live our lives in the midst of God's abundance.

Like the widow that Jesus lifted up,

we must trust in God completely,

giving even out of our poverty,

offering all that we are.

We have moved beyond the tithe.

We must offer the widows mite.

If we can do that,

God will surely reward our faith

and prosper our endeavors.

And the kingdom of God will come near to this place.

Amen.