

Dear Ones,

You have heard many times the familiar phrase, “May you live in interesting times.” Certainly, as we look around, we see we have been granted that wish. It is indeed interesting that at the time when churches begin to think about their annual pledge drives, we have also entered a time when “uncertainty in the financial markets” is nowhere near an adequate description of the angst of these days. We hear that so much of this is psychological, and I would suspect that is true. However, psychology does not make the results or products of our angst any less real. Those on the lower end of our human-made food chain will be the first to hurt, and many already are hurting.

While there is a clearly psychological component to all we see happening around us, I would like to insist that for people of faith, there is a spiritual one as well. It is one we often avoid and can dive deeper into denial about when the “times are good.” When faced with the current uncertainty and issues in our financial and work lives, we suddenly gain a bit more clarity about what is truly important. If a silver lining is in all of this, a gift to be accepted, perhaps it is that—the realization once again of all that is truly important—the eternal realities that cannot be ultimately changed or lost through financial ups and downs.

I heard another quote as this all began: “The only people who get hurt on a roller coaster are those who jump off.” So, on this recent financial roller coaster ride, in your churches you will hear such cries as, “We can’t do that now.” and “Stewardship is really going to suffer this year.” You will hear calls to step back and soft-sell the pledge drive even more than usual. This would be to jump off the roller coaster. Instead, this time may well be the best time ever to discuss the basic principles of Christian stewardship, which include the counterintuitive notion of living within our means while being amazingly generous. In fact, a lot of history shows that giving actually goes up during hard times; not the other way around. It will also be a time when we might actually begin a real conversation around money, where we might actually pay attention to those on the journey with us who are truly suffering in these times. Clearly, we may be called in this time to refocus our priorities, individually, locally, on the diocesan level and nationally. Being on the beginning of this ride, it is difficult to know how that will all look.

However, I am more and more convinced that we will never solve some of the problems, which are very real and often used to avoid the work of stewardship, unless we first take up the issue of the power money has over our lives. It is still remarkably true that we must decide who we will serve: God or mammon. Now, in this time when it seems ever clearer that money and possessions will never save us, we are presented with the opportunity to introduce good, solid principles of financial management and discuss even more what is forever true, and most assuredly our salvation: our relationship with Jesus Christ. Money will never save us, but our giving of it is a sure sign of our gratitude and a reminder to us of how God gives all to us, even our very lives. Part of our mission is to stay on the roller coaster and use this time to transform our relationship with money. This is no time for a failure of nerve, for this is our “real work.”

In the November 2007 issue of the *Voice*, for the first time as your bishop I was open with you about my personal giving. I will do this every year because I think it is very important for me to model this openness and Christian practice. It also takes the power out of money, and all we give to it, which gets in the way of honest discussions. If there was ever a time for honest discussions around money, surely it is now. If you have been around me at all, you know that I do not see the tithe as a bad thing. In fact, I believe in it so much that I practice it, too. A few years ago I was convinced in a Bible study that 10 percent was an expectation among the early faithful and that alms started only after that. At any rate, 10 percent is a good figure; it is not magic, but a good figure used by the faithful for generations. If 10 percent is too difficult, give some percentage and work toward 10 percent. For some, just calculating the percentage you give is a daunting but nonetheless very good step. I want to be equally clear about this: God will not love you any more or less, no matter what you give. Your salvation is not wrapped up in this. Thank God. No, for some reason, even Jesus knew we have a need as humans to give back, and by doing so we become richer even with less.

Through all our work, my family stands to bring in about \$134,000 next year. Most of that is what you pay me, but some money comes from other areas as well. With other benefits I get by being your bishop one could say I make even more. Even though this is not cash, I benefit from it. We plan to give \$25,420 (15.5 percent) of our income away to various things in which we believe and want to be part. Of that, \$17,056 will go directly to the Diocese of Olympia through each church I visit and other ministries here (10.4 percent of our income). For the third year, we have also decided to follow the .7-percent plan to help the world reach the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set by the United Nations and commended by our Presiding Bishop and General Convention as something toward which we should all strive. My family and I have signed on and will give .7 percent or more of our income toward world poverty reduction. So, the additional \$8,374 goes to the MDGs and other charities we support. Our son, Austin, follows the same program. He learned when he was old enough to know what money was, to give 10 percent of it back, save 10 percent and live on the rest. Austin is earning \$5 a week, and so he gives 50 cents each week to the church and 50 cents to savings. Even with his \$4, in this world, he is a rich man.

We have great gratitude for you, for this Church and most importantly for the gift of Jesus Christ who was the ultimate teacher on this very subject. As we ride this roller coaster, know I am hanging on tight, riding with you.

Faithfully,

Greg Rickel
Bishop of Olympia