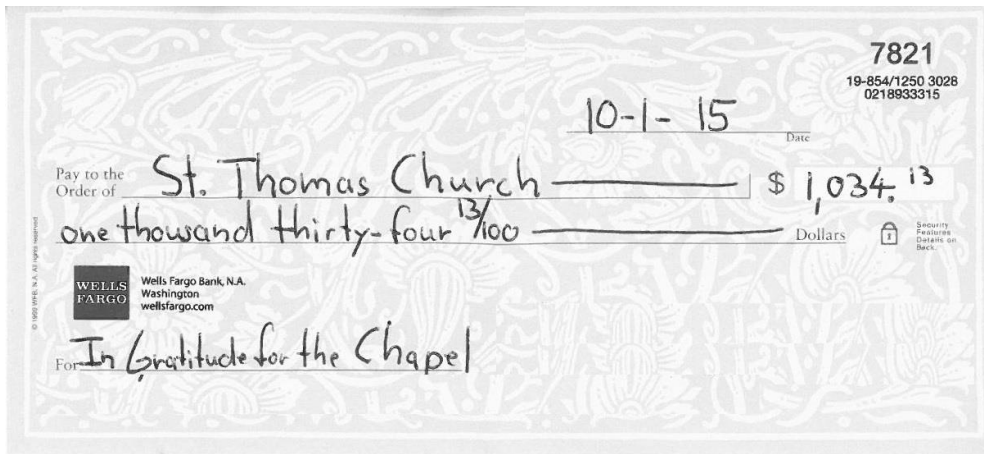


St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA
The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge
Church Year B
Date: 10/18/15
Season: Pentecost 21

This is going to be a short sermon. Hold the applause, please. This is going to be a short sermon because I'm not going to be the one preaching it. In fact, the preacher is actually not with us today, except in spirit. But the preacher did send in today's sermon. And I have very thoughtfully included the sermon in your wrapper. Go ahead and take a look.

S T E W A R D S H I P

Honor the Lord with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.
Proverbs 3: 9-10



As grateful stewards of the abundance of their lives, the people of Israel returned to God's service the "first fruits" of all with which they had been blessed. They gave, in other words, off the top and not from what was left over. The Bible is filled with references to "first fruits" giving, and the practice is commended by figures as diverse as Moses and the Apostle Paul.

There was a beautiful example of first fruits giving right here at St Thomas the other day. We have a neighbor who is not a member, but who values our chapel highly. This person often stops by for prayer and meditation in that beautiful space, and has been doing so for quite some time now. Recently, this person returned to work after several years of unemployment. In thanksgiving for the chapel and for this community, she decided to offer to St Thomas the entirety of her first paycheck. A copy of that check, with her name

and signature obscured, is reproduced above. She described this as an offering of the first fruits of her new job. You will note that it is given “In Gratitude for the Chapel.”

What an extraordinary and inspiring gift! May her gift inspire all of us to pray and discern ever more deeply what we might offer to God from the first fruits of the abundance with which we have all been blessed.

The check you see right in front of you. That’s the sermon. Let me give you a little background on this sermon.

Our beautiful chapel has visitors all the time, visitors who aren’t members of St. Thomas. They come to pray. To meditate. To light a candle for a loved one who might be sick or in trouble. They come to grieve. They come to give thanks. Sometimes they just come to sit in that beautiful, sublime, light-filled space. One such person, a neighbor who’s not a St. Thomas member, has been coming to the chapel for several years for prayer and contemplation.

One morning about three years ago, she happened to walk into the chapel just as one of our Centering Prayer groups was preparing for a sit. The group greeted her and invited her to join their prayer circle. She did and thereafter became a regular member of the group. Now, our Centering Prayer groups always save time for conversation and friendship once their prayer time is done and so over the years, our neighbor was drawn into the circle of friendship which these groups provide.

So it was with sadness that the Monday group received the news a couple of months back that our neighbor had found a new job that would keep her from being part of the group most Monday mornings. There was happiness too because our neighbor had been looking for a job for quite some time, but sadness that the new job would conflict with the group’s meeting time.

And then two weeks ago, on Monday morning, our neighbor returned to the group. Her work had a holiday that day and so she was free to rejoin her friends in Centering Prayer.

At the conclusion of the prayer time, our neighbor turned to the convener of the group and handed her a folded piece of paper. It turned out to be the check that you see in front of you – the check that is today’s sermon. Our neighbor said, “this is my first fruits gift to St. Thomas. It’s my first paycheck from my new job. I love St. Thomas and I love this chapel. I wanted to say thank you.”

Moses told the people of Israel that when they came into the Promised Land that they should take the first of all the fruits of the ground which they had harvested from the

land that the Lord was giving them, place it in a basket, and take it as an offering to the Lord. First-fruits-giving then came to mean giving of ourselves out of our abundance, not out of what's left over.

First fruits giving is a sign of gratitude for God's mercy and generosity and a sign of faith that God will provide for all our needs – even when it is not completely clear how God will chose to go about doing that.

The sermon you are holding in your hands is a far more eloquent testimony to faith than my words could be. And it's an eloquent testimony to the impact that God in Christ, working in and through this blessed community of St. Thomas, is having on lives that we may not even be aware of. "In gratitude for the Chapel" the check says in the memo line.

Our neighbor has set a powerful example for me and my family, that's for sure. The Lord has been so generous and merciful to us throughout our lives, how will we respond from our first fruits? And how will you respond?

You are here today, and you come here Sunday by Sunday, because God in Christ is moving in your life here – or because you are feeling God's movement in your life. What can we offer back to God in Thanksgiving for the gifts with which we have been blessed? Will we offer to God from our best?

Will we follow our neighbor's example and offer to God from our first fruits? I am so inspired by our neighbor's gift. As you hold your pledge card this week, prayerfully reflect on God's grace and mercy and abundance in your life. How will you express your thanks? And as you are reflecting on that, remember the sermon that you are holding in your hands right now. Amen.