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Dear Friends,

A Wealthy Church Not long ago Vestry member Charles Steward spoke in church and mentioned that St. Elizabeth's is often described—usually by people who are members somewhere else—as a “wealthy” church. Charles went on to say that we *are* a wealthy church, but that we are wealthy primarily in our members. The people of this congregation make it strong and lively, not the money.

Of course we need money to carry out our mission, but if we were to put our primary focus on the money, everything would—and, arguably should—fall apart fairly quickly. It is not crazy to think of the church as a business, provided we are clear that our business is to introduce people to God and the life that God offers (and, maybe, expects). Our product is our people—transformed hearts, minds, and souls which first produce transformed lives and in turn make a transformed world.

Church leaders are tempted to develop an agenda—social, political, or otherwise—attribute it to God, and then seek to enlist people to pursue it. But much more effective is a strategy which deepens everyone's relationship with, and understanding of, God, and then encourages everyone to go out and be an agent and representative of God wherever they are and whatever they are doing.

And since we are always prone to attribute to God what is our own agenda, testing our conclusions against scripture and with other Christians is always necessary. The Protestant part of our tradition asserts that if we are careful and diligent about forming Christian character, and if people are correspondingly devoted to being faithful to God, we are more likely to develop a Christian community than if we allocate authority only to a few, and require unquestioning obedience from the many. Further, the more experience we each have of living explicitly as Christians—consciously changing our behavior because of what we believe about God—the more our Godly identity becomes integrated into our basic character. We learn by doing.

Taking the time we need For most of us, most of the time, transformation from human nature to Godly nature happens slowly, not suddenly. It is more like growth (or, perhaps, our construction project...) which eventually produces a result, but not quickly. Think how long our physical and intellectual development takes; our spiritual development perhaps follows a similar timeline, and, to mature, requires, as do those other aspects of our selves, nurture, exercise, instruction, and correction. The material and the spiritual are closely related, but they are not the same—putting all

of our attention and resources into material growth, and expecting the spiritual to take care of itself is as unreasonable as doing the opposite.

The challenge I face each autumn in our annual ingathering is how to keep the proper perspective and balance as we look at issues of personal and spiritual growth and the provision of the material resources on which we depend to carry out our work. We need pledges, but to focus primarily on our income needs would very probably diminish our claim on those very resources.

The prevailing wisdom.... St. Elizabeth's depends on the current pledges of our members and friends for about 98% of the money we need to stay in business. In church circles, where everyone, for a variety of reasons, is looking at diminishing income, the prevailing wisdom is to focus on building up endowments, developing more "planned giving" (as if other giving were unplanned), renting out the building, or doing a succession of fund raising projects or events. I confess to being a dissenter from this approach, which, to me, looks more like focusing on money than on members. We need money to stay in business, but money will not keep us in business.

...and two other views Some years ago when Al Battaglia was one of our Wardens, he convinced me that if we did not talk about money we would not have the resources we would need to do the mission we believe God gives us. Al was not arguing for focusing on money instead of people, he was saying that our job was to find a way to talk about money with people so that they would be transformed first, and then their giving would follow appropriately.

We need to be clear and specific about the personal benefits of giving back to God in thanksgiving for what we receive from God. Giving is a powerful tool to shape our relationship with God and to keep our possessions from possessing us. Part of what Al taught me was that being equally clear about the specific ways in which people's offerings would be transformed into works of ministry was an important part of helping people to develop a healthy understanding of money and their relationship to it. "How will you use what I offer?" is not only a fair question, it is a necessary question if you take your stewardship of your resources seriously.

Last year Don Taylor, our current treasurer, told the story of his and Gigo's own journey from "charity" to "stewardship" in thinking about their resources. I have shared Don's talk from last year with a number of my clergy colleagues, and he is in high demand these days as a Sunday guest speaker in other congregations.

The wealthy people we know I have known wealthy people most of my life. Some of them had a lot of money, many did not. I suspect like many of you, I have known people with abundant financial resources whose lives I would not want for any amount of money. And I have been inspired, and challenged, by people whose material circumstances were modest, but whose lives were abundant.

Multiple Intelligence; understanding wealth In our generation, we have come to recognize that there is no such thing as "intelligence" but rather there are many kinds of intelligence. Some are adept with words, others with numbers; some have natural physical grace and ability, others have a great gift for people and relationships; musicians, artists, many mothers and fathers, cooks and chefs, those who practice well a craft or a trade—think of all the different kinds of intelligence we see, and depend upon, each day.

So also with wealth. Some people are wealthy in their portfolios and accounts, and that is certainly one kind of wealth. And some are wealthy in their families, in their health, in having found work they like, in discovering a gift or ability they can develop and practice, or in taking delight in helping and delighting others. Some are wealthy in the esteem in which they are held, and others in being

unconcerned by their standing in others' eyes. Some are wealthy in their memories; others, in their dreams. I think St. Elizabeth's is a parish of wealthy people, and we become a wealthy church when we each realize, and acknowledge, how we have been blessed.

Charles Dickens, terror, and totebags So take a moment to count your blessings, and let taking that inventory be part of your daily schedule. See how many new things you can come up with. I know that a time will come when I will look back on these days and marvel that I did not fully appreciate the blessings with which I am now surrounded. In my imagination, I go forward to that time, and then come back to this, so that I may more fully recognize and appreciate the blessings I now enjoy.

My mental expedition is something like the journey which Scrooge makes at the end of *A Christmas Carol*. Scrooge begins that story with a common but deeply disordered relationship with wealth and money. When his gaze is shifted from money to people, for the first time he becomes a wealthy man living a life of joy and, to his great surprise, generosity. Once Scrooge understands what is, and is not, wealth, his life changes entirely. No one argues or cajoles him into it, he is not bribed by offers of worldly honors or distinction, there are no listings in programs, no honorary dinners, no named chairs, not even any special totebags.

Scrooge becomes wealthy not because he suddenly acquires more money but because he suddenly begins to see things the way God sees them. Scrooge is—and if you haven't read the story recently, it makes for a good Advent project—both born again and raised from the dead. He discovers new life, and part of that discovery is realizing how he can use his money to share and bestow blessing on others. Scrooge discovers a bit of what it is like to be like God, or, as we say in the Baptism service, to grow into the full stature of Christ.

Playing the Discovery Card To make that discovery of how we are each blessed is one of the goals of the Christian life. Helping each of us to get to that place is one of the goals of St. Elizabeth's. Each of us making a commitment to give something back to God, through a pledge to the Church which God called into being, is a step towards asserting our appropriate relationship with our money, and a step towards becoming genuinely wealthy people.

The distance from true gratitude to gracious generosity is, I think, fairly short. When we know that we are blessed, and even more when we know by whom we are blessed, giving to the one who has given to us does not require an elaborate campaign. In the coming weeks we will continue to talk about blessings, about thanks, and about giving. We will have pie charts and tables and talk about what we have spent to do our mission in 2012 and what we—all of us as a congregation—hope to be able to do in 2013—that is all important information. But the money is not the focus. Our focus is on bringing our hearts, our minds, and our souls into closer relationship and alignment with God. When we do that, we will see our true wealth and know exactly what to do with it.

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