

Stewardship Homily

Bob Bullock

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

I am grateful to Father Wallace for this opportunity to speak with you today. As we do each year at this time, we begin a period of stewardship, when we are asked to consider the place Bethesda has in our lives as each of us calculates his or her annual pledge.

Yet, the difference here is that I do not speak to you as your rector, deacon or member of the vestry. Rather, I come to you as your vergers, a person responsible for supporting the rector in the conduct of services each week. Serving on the altar of this church is something I have done with great privilege for going on three decades, first under Father Parke, then Dean Vang, and now Father Wallace. It is a job I love and one I pay, gratefully to do, just as each of you pay to sit in your pews.

As many of you know of me, being on the altar is a continuation of the life I have spent in service. For most of my career, I served as an Air Force officer. I was the last in a line of military officers in my family that stretched back for virtually every generation to the 1700s, first serving the crown in Britain and Canada and then for the United States. The uniform I wore then, I wore with pride. But in the early 1990s, I added the uniform I wear today and made a pledge to serve the church with the same loyalty and commitment to the spiritual leaders of this church and God as I did in my military life.

Our pledge each week and each year to this or any church is an unusual one. For it is not transactional. We are not merely pledging to sustain the church for what it does for us but, rather, what it does for our community. To many of our members no longer able to be here with us, the pledge they make is an act of pure selflessness because they are giving, in large measure, for you.

As we consider our estate plans as we near the end of our lives, a pledge to Bethesda in our wills, as Ann and I have done, is not as much considering what it will do for us as what it will do for future generations. Yet, please know that this calculation is done with love and is inspired with a life full of memories of the time we have spent with our family and friends in this sacred space, all joining together for the Glory of God and to nurture a sense of wonderful community that has been found here at Bethesda for nearly 200 years.

Yet, there is more at stake here. Now our annual and future giving must be done with the knowledge of what can occur if we leave the support of this church to others. British writer on religion A.N. Wilson writes in his book, "God's Funeral, the Decline of Faith in Western Religion" of the diminishment of the role of traditional religion in Victorian Britain and draws parallels to what is seen around the world today.

As we look around this church, it is hard to believe that there could be a day without a Bethesda in Saratoga Springs. And yet, today, on the corner of Caroline and Circular Streets, people live in apartments in a structure where once others prayed. Across the street, others will go to concerts where only a couple of decades ago children were baptized and many were married or laid to rest.

Indeed, the presence of this place is as much at risk as it is in every traditional church in America.

What draws me back each week? It is countless memories of watching my children grow from the infants in the front row who used to bother you with their noise and are now beautiful and poised young women who, when both of them moved to New York City, gravitated immediately to St. Thomas because the music and liturgy reminded them of what they knew growing up here at Bethesda...It is the memory of September 11, 2001, the night of the World Trade Center attack, when Father Parke opened the church so that people could seek solace and a feeling of safety in a now increasingly troubled world...It is the memory of hundreds who joined together to mourn the loss of that same rector of more than four decades...It is the memory of the countless weddings and funerals of those who we have held dear here as friends...it is the memory of Christmases and Easters when hundreds would join together to celebrate God's majesty as we marked Christ's birth and resurrection. In each instance, as those of you who know this place best recognize better than anyone, there is a sublime way that we hold God in our hearts here. Sometimes it is profound, other times it is quiet but it is always present.

As I close, I ask that you take a moment while this service or any service is going on, to look around at this place, listen to Farrell's glorious interpretation of hundreds of years of sacred music, remember the majestic sounds of the Schola Cantorum for, yes, they will be back, and consider the tens of thousands of lives, including your own, and those of your family's, who have touched, and been touched by God in this place in a very special way.

As one who has felt greatly blessed to worship here at Bethesda, I feel certain that Bethesda will be here to celebrate its 300th anniversary. But, to do this, I know that I, you, and generations that come behind us must recognize that for this to happen, it is up to us. We must give as generously as we can. We must remember what Bethesda has provided for us and we must convert that knowledge into action and charity.

Again, Father Wallace, I thank you for this time and I thank all of you for listening and keeping Bethesda in your thoughts, lives and prayers.

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