

LONGING AND DESIRE:

a sermon praught by the Rev'd Gerald Keucher
in the church of St Mary, Staten Island, New York,
at the Litany and Sung Mass for Advent Sunday,
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I'M JERRY KEUCHER, and I'm happy to be here again this morning. I'm not with you very often, because my job as the Controller and Acting CAO of the Diocese takes me all over. But I'm happy to celebrate the Church's New Year's Day with you, and do let me remind you that you are all invited to share the secular New Year's Day with Fr. John and me on January 1 from 2 to 6 pm at One Pendleton Place. It's a great party, if I do say so myself, and it'll be all the better for having as many of you as possible.

I'm the Controller, so I do money. I do diocesan money; I do parish money; and, as you will hear, I have some things to say about *your* money. Advent will get us there.

Advent is all about the future. It's about the near-term future, as we look toward Christmas, when God began to set the world right by being born as one of us. Advent is also about the far-distant future, when God will complete the restoration of the Creation and bring everyone home. So we call Advent a season of preparation and expectation, but it's really the season of desire and longing. We want Christmas to come, and we long for the world to be set right. Advent is about longing and desire.

But our relationship with God is really always all about desire. What do you want? I'm not talking about all the things advertisers try to manipulate us into thinking we want. Get underneath all that. What do you want from your life? What do you want from your participation at St. Mary's?

Do you want to love God? Do you want Him to fill you so that there's no place for anxiety and suspicion? Do you want a transforming experience of God? Do you want to get to the place where doing what you really want to do means doing what God wants? Do you want your heart to be one with God? I think you do want those things. That's why you're here. Of course we want our hearts to be with God.

If you want your heart to be with God and stay with God, here's a suggestion I've found very powerful in my life. Put your money where you want your heart to be. Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Your heart follows your money, not the other way around. We think it's the other way around. We think we spend our money on the things that are important to us, but in fact, those things are

important to us *because* they're what we spend our money on. Put your money where you want your heart to rest, and your heart will move there.

If you really want your heart to be with God — and I believe you do — then you might want to change *how* you give to St. Mary's and to God's work in the world. Don't treat what you give to the church as just another bill that has to be paid — or one that doesn't get paid if there's not enough left over. Don't think of your gift as a tax or as club dues, and for heaven's sake, don't let it be just a tip that's less than you spend on lunches or commuting.

Make your gift a first-fruits offering. Fix a percentage in your head and in your heart and give that percentage off the top to God whenever money goes into the bank or into your hand. What percentage? Well, we tithe — that's ten percent off the top, the first checks I write after we've received any money. I strongly suggest that, if you want your heart to be with God, you give God no less than five percent off the top. Giving God off the top a percentage of what you receive is good, strong medicine for the heart. Ten percent is the recommended dose. Five percent is a therapeutic dose, but giving God any percentage off the top — 2½% or 3% or 4% — is better for your heart and your faithfulness and commitment to God than giving any set amount that is not off the top and that has no relationship to your income.

It's easy to figure what percentage you're already giving. Just divide your pledge by your income. If what you're giving works out to less than 3% of your income — and I'll bet that some of you will find it works out to less than 2% — then please just try giving God off the top three or five cents of every dollar God gives you. You *can* give God a nickel off the top of every dollar you get. You'll get along just fine with all your obligations. The more anxious you are about money, the more important it is to try giving a percentage off the top. Giving back to God a percentage of what God has given you almost immediately reduces your anxiety about money.

So what do you put on your pledge card? You put an estimate of what you think your percentage will result in. You turn in your pledge card and you *forget the estimate*. Just set your percentage now and

concentrate on the percentage. Make your gifts off the top according to the percentage you've set in your heart. I've been doing this for 25 years, long before I was ordained, and I think I've always ended up giving more than the dollar estimate on the pledge card.

Give back to God only at those times when God gives you something. If you get all your income once a month, then give your percentage once a month, and don't worry about the other weeks. If you get paid twice a month of every other week, then give only at those times. This is a great way to do it if you're self-employed or if your money comes from different sources at different times. Give weekly only if you get paid weekly. Break the tyranny of the weekly envelope. Give when you receive, and don't sweat the weeks in between. That's the first radical thing I'm suggesting. Give back to God only when God has given to you.

And the second radical things I'm suggesting is that you give a percentage off the top. Make your gift to God a proportion of what you've just received, and do it first before you do anything else.

This will change your life. You might think that dealing with your money is about the least religious thing you do, but proportional giving off the top changes all that. It means that every time you sit down to deal with your money, the first thing you do is to make a thank offering to God that is in proportion to what God has just given you. It turns paying your bills into an act of worship, not because you're reciting prayers while you're doing it, but because your very actions of making that gift means you're ***doing*** your faith by relying on God's promises. It is the most powerful way to use that most powerful tool that is your money in the service of your spiritual transformation.

I'm quite serious. This changed my life. This will change your life. Giving back to God a first-fruits offering that is in proportion to what God has given you makes you more eager to receive God's gifts. It puts you on the level of the free gift, which is the only level on which God deals with us. It gets rid of all sense of entitlement, all sense of being a victim, and just about all the anxiety you ever feel about your money. You become a mature, whole person, ready to be part of the relationship

of freely giving and freely receiving that is characteristic of those whose hearts are with God.

Proportional giving off the top — that's my sermon, and I'll show you how it works in a minute. But first, I want to point out what this sermon has *not* been. I haven't said a word about how much the parish needs your money. I haven't mentioned budgets or capital needs. I haven't said "should" or "ought to" a single time. I haven't browbeat you or played a single guilt card. Look, you're all bright people. You know perfectly well that if St. Mary's is going to thrive, it isn't going to happen with other people's money. If this isn't important to you, why would it be important to anyone else? I'm not going to dwell on that, because it's obvious.

My point is different. I know that you *want* this congregation to thrive. I know that you want it to be here so that future generations can meet God here just as you have. I know that you have probably felt that you'd like to do more, but that you just can't do any more. Well, I'm here to empower you. I'm here to show you and witness to you that *you can be as generous as you've always wanted to be*. And here's how it works.