

The past several weeks, we've listened to Matthew's accounting of the Pharisees' attempts to trick Jesus. This morning is their last effort to trap him and try to rid themselves of the threat they perceive to their world order, their established status quo.

According to Jewish tradition, the Torah contains 613 commandments. Jesus responds to the Pharisees' final round of testing by boiling those all down to the two greatest: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." In quoting the first commandment from Moses as recorded in Deuteronomy, Jesus both follows rabbinic law and upends conventional notions about what is truly important in God's eyes.

In what he calls the "first and greatest commandment," Jesus challenges the religious leaders to consider what it really means to love God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. The mandate seems simple enough. But simple doesn't always equate to easy. For "all" of our heart and soul and mind appears to leave no room for other priorities. The words seem to encompass our whole being, our entire selves—all that we feel, think, and do. It may be simple, but it certainly sets a high bar. Like the Pharisees, we face the challenge of considering this lofty measure: Do we love God with all our heart and soul and mind, and our neighbor as ourselves?

This past Tuesday I attended the State of Howard County address, which reported on how the community measures up, to citizens' expectations as well as compared to other counties in the nation. The County Executive detailed a long list of investments, including a new interfaith council I've been invited to

serve on, and I'm excited by the prospects of connecting with leaders from Jewish and Muslim and other faith traditions to do God's work in the world.

The list also included \$250,000 for pickleball. Yes, pickleball. The county recently put in eight dedicated pickleball courts at Western Regional Park, as part of a historic \$26.4 million investment in parks improvements in 2023.

Apparently, Howard County residents prioritize our park space, and we are big fans of pickleball.

At Christ Church's Annual Meeting a few weeks ago, Father Manny similarly spoke to our investments and our strengths, as well as areas where we could improve. Our Annual Report contained dozens of pages—30, to be exact—detailing how this congregation “measures up,” from our outreach initiatives, to our buildings and grounds, to our youth and family ministry, and much more. It was an impressively thick bulletin, to be sure.

For us, the State of the Church is less about our activities or how inviting our open space, although those things certainly contribute to our common life. But more than that, I believe the State of Christ Church embodies how we measure up to the two greatest commandments we heard in Matthew's Gospel: How do we show we love God? And how do we show we love our neighbor?

We might think we know the answer to those deceptively simple questions. But continual self-evaluation and discernment are critical components of a faith journey, both on an individual and a community level.

Every week we confess together that we have sinned against God in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. That

we have not loved God with our whole heart, and not loved our neighbors as ourselves. In acknowledging our failures—not just at weekly worship but daily in our hearts—we ask God’s forgiveness and choose to repent: to make some change and work toward the commitments of our baptismal covenant.

The word stewardship is not explicitly used in our confession or our baptismal covenant, but I would argue the thread is woven through each and every line, all falling within the tapestry of those top-two commandments: loving God with our whole being, and our neighbor as ourselves.

This is our fourth and final week of our official stewardship season, before we come together next Sunday to offer our gifts. Over the past month, I’ve heard stewardship described as various things: obligation, duty, the right thing to do, a practical matter, an investment. All of those seem true and fair to me, but I’d like to suggest three other ways to think about stewardship, which collectively address two questions: Why give? and Why give to Christ Church?

First, in addressing “Why Give,” we could consider how stewardship is a marker of our spiritual growth.

A mentor of mine once shared a bit of wisdom passed down by a mentor of his: God doesn’t need your money. But you need to give God your money. Spiritually mature minds understand the act of giving benefits us far more than the church we give to. In our giving, we recognize that everything we are, all that we have, is all from God, all for God.

We’re all on different paths on this continuum. For some, it might be the first time we’ve ever filled out a pledge card. Some of us might be looking at our bills

and wondering how we can part with the little bit left over each month. Others are contemplating the goal of “tithing,” and the significance of giving a dedicated percentage of our income.

Wherever we fall on that spectrum, as we grow spiritually, we begin to integrate stewardship as part of how we demonstrate loving God with our heart, soul, and mind. We understand Jesus’ referral to the “heart” as encompassing the very center of our willing, choosing, and doing. We accept that stewardship calls us to actively and continually reflect, pray, and discern around our relationship to money and material goods.

It's true, Christ Church needs to pay our electric bill and our staff and our mortgage. And we need people to pledge so we know how much to budget for certain things. But more importantly, as individual disciples of Christ, we need to move from a place of fear, anxiety, and scarcity, to a place of trust and abundance. Stewardship is more than an annual campaign or the amount we put on our pledge card. It's as central to our spiritual growth as worship, bible study, and formation. What is the state of our hearts and minds around stewardship? Is it where we want it to be?

Second, in addressing “Why give to Christ Church,” we might consider how stewardship is part of our collective faith journey. Christ Church is not a philanthropic foundation. If you just want to give money to do good, you can give to the American Heart Association, the Red Cross, the American Cancer Society, and a myriad of other service organizations. This is one reason we define stewardship holistically as giving our time, talents, and treasures to glorify God. In fact, I'd love to see our pledge cards also have a space to pledge time and talent. The many ministries here need many different

gifts. Here you can marry your passions and talents to serve the needs of the world.

What distinguishes us from philanthropies and charitable organizations is that our work is Christ-centered, and we can measure its success against those two commandments of loving God with our whole being and our neighbor as ourselves.

The question is, do we trust this community to do God's work? Not the work we personally think it should do, because we love music or have a particular passion for community outreach, but the work the Spirit leads this community to do together. We may have our opinions about what that should be, and thankfully we have processes to help determine fiscal allocations and a means to have a voice in the decisions of this church—systems and people we entrust to focus our mission and ministry.

I realize that in today's world, trust in institutions is a hard sell. But take a moment to look around at those sitting beside you. We have chosen this place as our faith community, the place where we gather as the Body of Christ. In a world more disconnected, isolated, and divided than ever, here, we belong to each other, we care for each other, we hold each other accountable.

And I believe we've chosen well. I believe the Spirit is moving in particularly powerful ways here at Christ Church. Where churches are losing people, we are thriving. Where churches choose to operate in isolation, we choose to make connections to spread seeds that are literally changing lives.

But we will only continue to thrive if we face the realities of how the Church is changing, what people need from the Church, and how we can be beacons of Christ's light. We have an opportunity to show the world—or at least our little corner of it—how to be community. There's far more at stake than budgets and bills and balance sheets. What's at stake is nothing less than the Gospel itself, a chance to deliver the Good News to a hurting humanity. Stewardship is central to our collective faith journey.

Finally, at the point where the questions of why give and why give to Christ Church converge, we might consider stewardship as opportunity to experience joy. Yes, let me repeat that. We might consider stewardship as an opportunity to experience joy. When we give from a place of prayerful discernment and stretch ourselves so we can grow ever closer to God, we can experience joy. When we give as part of a healthy and Christ-centered faith community, we can experience joy. When we stop treating stewardship as something to grit our teeth and bite our nails through, we open ourselves to seeing the act of giving as a beautiful blessing.

In the week to come, let us consider how we can give from a place of joy and celebration, that in this time and place, God has given us the opportunity grow together, to trust each other, and to be open to the Spirit working in and through this community. And let us prayerfully discern how our giving reflects our fulfillment of God's greatest commandments, which we could simplify even further to just one word: love.