

GOD THE GIVER

Stewardship Narrative Series presented by TENS

Proper 26
Mark 12:28-34

The scribe challenged Jesus. The concept of a challenge is something that you and I face every day. Some of the challenges we face are simple for us as I rather imagine this one was for Jesus.

Our culture today has turned the idea of a challenge into an enormously successful and highly profitable marketing scheme.

To turn the television on most any evening of the week a viewer is likely to confront a program built entirely around a challenge.

Perhaps the challenge is about “Dancing with the Stars,” or the competition for “American Idol,” or even winning huge sums of money at the challenge of poker, or simply singing with your voice. I do not remember as a child ever being confronted with the abundance of challenges that are so pervasive today. Rarely do I have a whole week pass without having a friend describe in some detail the athletic challenge he or she just met. It might be a walkathon, a marathon, a triathlon; but it always centers on succeeding by meeting the objective challenge placed before them.

My friend Marek Zabriskie, rector of St. Thomas Church Whitemarsh, has developed from his parish in Philadelphia a world fellowship he calls “The Bible Challenge.” I accused him of finding such phenomenal success in his program solely because he named it a challenge. Few folks in our tradition ever



even entertain the idea of Bible reading unless linked up with a personal test or challenge. To read the entire Bible cover to cover every year sounds most unusual in our Anglican tradition.

We need to place the whole idea of stewardship into our culture’s craving to meet a challenge. Would a parish respond to the idea of a tithe challenge? How many people would sign up if it were offered as a personal challenge similar to the Bible reading fellowship?

Jesus responded clearly to his scribe’s challenge. He met it and satisfied his hearers. You and I have never offered a tithe as a challenge. It has become an obligation outside our response. Doctors know full well that it is not enough just to tell a patient to lose weight, stop smoking, exercise, or even drink moderately. The physician also knows that when framed as a challenge, a directive contains an utterly different form of motivation that strikes to the very core of our current dominant culture. Stewardship needs to adapt to that culture. This time the challenge comes from Jesus to us.



The Rev. Dr. Daniel Paul Matthews is the rector emeritus of historic Trinity Church, Wall Street, New York City. In retirement he and his wife, Diane, live in Manhattan.

Reflection Questions:

How would a tithing challenge work in your parish?

Would taking on the challenge of a tithe bring satisfaction like that with an athletic challenge?

Have you ever personally felt that God was challenging you to give more?



The Episcopal Network for Stewardship