

## **Sermon for July 18, 2010** **The Rev John A. Baldwin**

Three weeks ago I attended a meeting at Ascension Episcopal Church in Norfolk, VA on the future of Talbot Hall, just 2 blocks down the street from Ascension. Sixty years ago, this lovely tract of land along the Elizabeth River was deeded to the diocese of Southern Virginia by the Talbot family. It has served as the site of our diocesan offices ever since. Last summer our bishop, Holly Hollerith, appointed a committee to explore options for this property, including its possible sale.

The meeting room was packed with nearly 200 people, most of them from the community surrounding Talbot Hall. Bud Schoolar, committee chair, presented the dilemma the diocese is facing, with property which is badly in need of massive renovations, a severely challenged diocesan budget, and long-standing concerns about whether the diocese would be better served by moving the bishop's office to a more central location, for a diocese that stretches all the way to Danville in the west (4 hours away), and Appomattox in the northwest.

During the discussion that ensued, a particular word was used by both the majority favoring diocesan retention of the property, and the minority (including myself) favoring diocesan sale of the property and relocation. That word is "stewardship".

In the open discussion, those favoring retention of Talbot Hall by the diocese expressed concern about its being sold to a condominium builder, and the subsequent increased flow of traffic in and out of this tranquil community. Given its prime location, these concerns are well founded. They stressed faithful stewardship of the Talbot legacy, preservation of one of the last remaining stretches of undeveloped waterfront property in Norfolk, and restoration of the historic Talbot homestead, which might be torn down by a developer. Faithful stewardship, from this perspective, means maintaining the status quo.

Those favoring diocesan sale of the property, on the other hand, view faithful stewardship as the diocese divesting itself of a money pit, and investing the resources from its sale in new initiatives for mission and ministry in a more easily assessable location for the whole diocese. Faithful stewardship, from this perspective, means exploring and embracing new possibilities.

I find it fascinating that the word "stewardship" could be used so powerfully and persuasively by both sides of the discussion. Yet, is this not the case in so many of the cogent arguments of our time and culture? Is not the debate between environmentalists and oil companies, one of stewardship? ....on the one hand preserving and protecting the environment for future generations vs. accessing our natural resources for the use our benefit of our citizens in the here and now. Is not the debate between those who are pro- and anti- government stimulus in our economy, one of stewardship?...putting people to work now vs. burdening future generations with a heavier debt load. Is not how we approach educating our young, addressing social ills, ensuring safety and security, or allocating our tax dollars, one of stewardship? In fact, I would venture to say that

virtually every-thing we do is a matter of stewardship. It boils down to how we faithfully make use of our resources (time, talent and treasure). It's also about our taking responsibility to manage our life and property with proper regard to the rights of others.

We often make the mistake in churches of preaching about stewardship only in the midst of our Every Member Commitment Program when we are seeking pledges for the year ahead, instead of year-round. This implants in people's minds that stewardship is a matter of fund-raising, rather than a commitment of faithfulness to using all that we've been given for the glory of God, and the building up of His Kingdom here on earth.

Stewardship is a word with deep roots in the New Testament and in the teaching and parables of Jesus. In fact, it's arguable that our Gospel reading this morning about Jesus' visit to the home of Mary and Martha is a stewardship story - about choosing the better part. Lots of stories have been preached about Mary and Martha, with Mary coming out smelling like a rose in many of them. Jesus' message at first glance seems to be that Mary's use of time in listening to Jesus is better spent than Martha fussing about with her pots and pans. But if Martha wasn't on task, Jesus might have gone to bed hungry and possibly grumpy that night. He might not have been quite so lavish in his praise of Mary.

What Jesus was responding to, I believe, was Martha's criticism of Mary...the kind of criticism leveled by the movers and shakers (the “doers” of the world), towards those who sit idly by, yet who are truly present to their guests (the “be-ers”) of the world. If we are too absorbed in “doing” we may miss the joy of bouncing a ball with a two year old, and delighting in his learning to use words. We may block out the aromas and delights of a walk through the garden on our way to the office. We may spend all our time pondering the tasks of the day ahead, without being truly thankful for another day of life.

Mary has chosen “the better part” in Jesus' eyes, because he knows his time on earth is limited, and he has so much to give to her and to Martha as well. He is concerned that Martha in her scurry to get supper on the table may “miss the moment” all together and Jesus doesn't want any of his disciples to miss the moment.

Every one of us has been richly blessed with talent, time and treasure. We can be faithful in our use of them, or easily squander them. Do we faithfully use our gifts to bless others with our presence, skills and generosity? Do we care gently for our bodily and spiritual well-being in how we invest our time and energy? Do we take time to reflect on how we are personally doing as stewards of God's creation? Do we honor God with our heart, soul and strength, or do we carelessly ignore or bury the gifts we've been blessed with?

Faithful stewardship matters....at all times, in all places, and in everything we do. Amen.