



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

Whitsunday or The Feast of Pentecost, May 15th, 2016

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. *AMEN* ✠

The most embarrassing thing I could imagine doing when I was a teenager was going to church with Great Uncle Tom. Granted the teen years are a time when folks get very easily embarrassed. But I still blush when I recall the embarrassment I felt sitting in a pew beside Great Uncle Tom.

His appearance wasn't the problem, though this was, I confess, a trifle eccentric. Great Uncle Tom possessed a seemingly endless supply of threadbare tweed jackets, all two sizes too big for him, sleeves over his fingers like a Chinese mandarin. Beneath, he favored moth-eaten cardigans and baggy grey-flannel trousers, all sprung at the seat and knees.

In winter, he looked like a deserter from the siege of Leningrad, bundled up in scarves at least a fathom long, and an ancient, hairy Harris Tweed overcoat, obviously been made for a man at least a foot taller than himself. This frightful garment stretched down to his ankles, and its bulging side pockets bounced around his knees as he walked.

His hearing aid, technologically speaking, was a step up from the ear trumpet, but not much of one. It had clearly been conceived in the early days of vacuum tube radio; vast even by 1950s standards. It looked like one of the Tannoy public address speakers favored by the British Navy ("Eerr-ah, errh-ah: Now hear this, now hear this . . .").

But the real embarrassment started just after the sermon hymn when he would settle comfortably in his pew, extravagantly switch off the vast hearing aid and close his eyes, snoozing contentedly, making occasional sucking sounds and clacky noises with his dentures. This continued through the sermon and, if possible, through the offertory itself.

But the sidesmen who took up the collection in blue velvet bags on long, polished ash poles, had long been wise to him. They would prod him awake with the bag on the pole. With the entire parish looking on, Great Uncle Tom would balefully open his eyes, and affect not to understand what they wanted.

The sidesmen would prod him again and Great Uncle Tom would fumble in his pockets, producing out handfuls of fluff, a grimy pocket handkerchief or two and a few assorted coins. He would sift carefully through the coins, drop a couple in the velvet bag. If the sidesman judged he hadn't put in enough, he would prod him again, and, amid much grumbling, Great Uncle Tom would grudgingly add coins until the sum reached half-a-crown – the very least a man of means could reasonably give. All the while, I would sit beside him, crimson with the gross mortification of guilt by association – fantasizing about up-ending the old geezer and dumping every last penny in his ample pockets at the sidesmen's feet.

The moral to this story is that it is not only God who loveth a cheerful giver (*II Corinthians 9:7*), but so, too, do those who accompany him to church, not least his teenage great nephews.

Great Uncle Tom is a great model to keep in mind when it comes to talking about giving. He would, for example, have been appalled by the Christians who claim the standard for giving set down by God in the Old Testament is the tithe; a 10 per cent cut of everything.

However, St. Paul says the Old Covenant has been superseded by the New. If we are not obliged to avoid eating pork and shellfish any more, surely the Mosaic Law regarding tithing has also been done away with?

Paul was quite right. The old law no longer applies. Jesus has established a new standard – a rather more realistic and flexible one. It recognizes some people are so poor they can by no means afford to tithe their income to God. At the same time, it recognizes that others are so well off they can afford to give far more than a tenth and still live in great comfort.

The new standard Jesus has laid down is a tough one. He tells us God doesn't want a tenth of what we have; he wants us to give him what's right. That means we must examine our consciences, and decide not how little we can get away with, but how much we ought to be giving. It's a hard call, which is why some opt for 10 per cent as the easiest solution.

A useful yardstick by which to gauge our giving is the amount we devote to things we really enjoy. Jesus put it this way: "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." And his rule also applies to people so poor they can give nothing in their way of financial help to further the Gospel.

Poverty does not absolve us of our obligation to further Christ's kingdom. We

might not have much cash, but we can make up the deficiency with gifts of our time and talents. Few of us are so bereft of time and talents we have nothing at all to offer.

Great Uncle Tom understood this well. He might have been a skinflint, but he gave a great deal of his time and talents to the church. He was a noted athlete and gymnast and – from the early 1900s through the 1940s – he worked tirelessly to set up gymnasiums in churches in Britain's slums so young people had somewhere to hang out other than pubs and pool halls. And, while he was tight-fisted during his lifetime, he was generous to both the parish and his gym clubs in his will.

St. Stephen's is a small church and a modest one. Like most relatively new churches, we sometimes find ourselves strapped for cash just paying our bills. We don't have a hefty endowment to fall back on, but the fact that resources are limited doesn't mean we should hoard them until they grow bigger. The parable of the talents teaches us that God expects even the people with only one talent to make the very best of it.

The treasurer has asked me to remind you that a reliable cash flow is as important to a parish as it is to a family or a secular business. Of course, we would like you to consider prayerfully increasing your pledges. Times are tough, and we realize not every one will be able to do so. But even if you can't, you can help us greatly by keeping up to date with your existing pledge.

I can't presume to tell you how much you ought to give to the church. That's a matter between you and God. But I do know that it should not be counted in cash alone. The parish also needs your enthusiasm, your energy and your participation to fulfill its mission to the community. It's not just a question of putting your money where your mouth is, but your body and soul as well.
AMEN.