

I want to begin by highlighting a very stark contrast in that gospel reading that we've just heard from St. Mark. It's a contrast between something that James and John, the two brothers, say to Jesus, and then something that Jesus Himself says towards the end of the passage. The brothers say to Jesus at the start of that passage, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." Later on in the passage, Jesus calls the disciples together and says, "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant. For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve."

James and John asked Jesus to dance to their tune and respond to their desires. Jesus encouraged the disciples to look first to the needs of others. The contrast here is between putting ourselves at the center and putting ourselves off center. I'm reminded of what JFK said at his inaugural address. "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country." That too speaks of changing our perspective so that we don't begin with our own needs and desires.

That's a huge shift that can take a lifetime to achieve. And there are some people sadly, who don't even manage it over the course of a lifetime. We start our lives as babies who hopefully have adults around them to tend to every need, to wait on them all the time. Hopefully there comes a stage that we realize that we're meant to grow out of that. That's not meant to be how we go through life. Remember Copernicus, the great Polish astronomer, who discovered that it's not the Earth at the center of the universe. It's the sun. He moved the Earth off center.

On this stewardship Sunday, I want to talk about how our life looks when we put God at the center of our lives, not ourselves with our own needs and desires. And the first thing that I'll mention comes out of the epistle that we heard from the Book of Romans, where St. Paul says, "Present yourselves as a living sacrifice, which is your spiritual worship." When we recognize Copernicus-like, that God and the universe don't revolve around us, we are free to see that our life needs to revolve around God

and our worship of Him. To use Paul's striking phrase, we are to be a "living sacrifice."

The Westminster Confession famously says, "The chief end of man or woman is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." That's a long way from where James and John were at. We don't live our lives to have our own needs met. We live to worship and honor the God who created us. That's our primary goal.

I like the story, the well-known story of the chicken and the pig who were walking down the high street. And they came to a grocery store with a sign outside that said, "bacon and eggs desperately needed." The chicken looks at the pig and says, "I'll give them the eggs if you give them the bacon." The pig stares back at the chicken and says, "No way." "Why not?" asked the chicken. Well, to which the pig says, "Because for you, it's a contribution. For me, it's my life."

And I want to start our season of stewardship by putting stewardship in this context. Stewardship is not about making a contribution. It's about how our lives are orientated. Are our lives so focused on God that we might be said to be a living sacrifice, that our whole life is an offering to God? Stewardship is not about tipping God. It's a challenge to be all in.

There's a story told that my dad used to love telling this story about the little Scottish boy in a very small Presbyterian church in the outer reaches of Scotland. And they were having a missionary meeting, and the collection plate goes around. And it got to this little boy, and he said to the person with the plate in a Scottish accent that I won't even attempt to do, "Could you put the plate lower?" So, they did. And then he said, "No lower." He said, "Actually, could you put it on the floor?" So, the person put the plate on the floor and this little boy stepped in. He said, "I'll give myself. I've got nothing else to give." And that little boy went on to be a very famous missionary in Africa.

Yes, we'll be talking in this season about how we might offer our time, our talents, and our treasure to the church. But what I want to begin with is the

reminder that God wants us. We are the object of His desire. We are the living sacrifice to God.

So let me go on to say something about how our lives might look different with God at the center. When that happens, we recognize that everything we have comes as gift. There's nothing that we've earned, nothing that we deserve. It's a gift, a blessing. In fact, it's more than that. All that we have isn't really ours. It's from God. We are stewards of the resources at our disposal, not owners.

I had a very profound reminder of this the other week when I went to an estate sale. I love going to estate sales. And this one was at the home of a man called Ivan Boesky, which some people remember that name. He was very famous in the 1980s as a Wall Street trader who inspired the Gordon Gecko character in the film Wall Street, with that famous refrain "Greed is good." And there was something rather poignant about going through Ivan Boesky's house, picking over his possessions that he'd worked so hard to accumulate. And I bought a pair of very overpriced hushpuppies to remind me as I walk around that we don't own anything. We are stewards. Everything we own will eventually be passed on. You can't walk into heaven wearing hushpuppies. You can't take them with you.

Listen out for the offertory words that we'll be saying soon. "All things come from you, and of your own have we given you." That's a reminder that we are stewards, that everything we have is gift, that we only give back out of what God has already given us. It's all gift. We give back what God has blessed us with. All things come from You.

And I wanted to pick out a verb in that epistle from Romans, which reinforces this idea of seeking to live our lives with God at the center, to reorientate our life in that way. St. Paul encourages his readers to be transformed. James' and John's view of the world would be to think about what do we need? What are we missing? What do we need to do to make our lives complete? How can we improve ourselves? What can make things better?

But be transformed is a passive verb. St. Paul was not advocating self-improvement, self-realization, self-reliance, self-aggrandizement. He's saying rather, open yourselves up. It's not about what you do, it's about what you allow God to do with you and inside you. Open yourself up to being transformed by the work of God's Spirit.

And what we pray for ourselves we can pray too for our church community. I pray that God will be at work amongst us as a church, that in this season of stewardship, God will be at work transforming us. Let's together seek to be transformed. Amen.