

- Saint Benedict, also called the Father of Western Monasticism, wrote in the 6<sup>th</sup> century what would later be called the Rule of Saint Benedict.
  - The rule helped to establish monasteries spiritually and practically all over the world guiding, not just the monks and nuns in the Benedictine community, but, through them, and other religious communities, much of Western civilization.
  - The first word in the Rule of Saint Benedict is; “Listen,” and Saint Benedict goes on to say, “listen with the ear of your heart.”
  - True listening involves not only hearing what is said, but also allowing our hearts to absorb the message so as to understand what he have heard and allow it to take root in our lives.
  - It’s a word of caution to us that we can get caught up in saying the right things and giving the correct teachings, while not living them ourselves.
  - In Mark’s Gospel Jesus asked the question to the crowds who were seeking a sign, but not listening to his teachings; “Do you have eyes and not see, ears and not hear?”
- How well do we listen?
  - We hear the Word of the Lord in the Sacred Scriptures and if we listen with our heart something might strike us as the Lord speaking in a very personal way.
  - It might be a word that brings us comfort during some trying time, or a word that guides us as we are struggling, or a word that reminds us of God’s faithfulness at all times.
  - There are many other ways that God’s word can speak to us and guide us, but in order for this to happen we have to listen and to listen with our hearts.

- Today, Jesus gives again the challenge “to listen with our hearts,” telling us that we must be ready to act on what we hear. Simply hearing it and repeating it is not enough for a true disciple. We need to recognize the voice of God giving us not only comfort and guidance but calling us share the blessings we have received.
  - It’s the same message Jesus gave us a few weeks ago when he exhorted us to *Repay to Caesar to what is Caesar’s but give to God what is God’s*.
  - As Christians, we strive to receive gratefully all God gives us, to cherish it, to use it in a responsible manner and to share it in justice and love with others, thus returning it to the Lord with an increase.
  - In other words, listening with heart, hearing God’s voice, giving to God what is God’s, all starts with God’s love for us. God has given us so much because He loves us.
  - Listening with the heart, giving to God what is God’s, is ultimately about making a conscious and firm decision to be a follower of Jesus Christ, no matter the cost, a decision which is ratified and carried out only in action.
  - “Giving to God what is God’s” is about returning God’s love. focuses on choosing and living a God-centered life, realizing all we have and all we do, indeed all we are **able** to do, comes from God. How we steward those gifts, what we choose to do with those gifts is our gift back to God in gratitude.
  - It’s the way we fulfill our baptismal promise to love and serve the Lord. Stewardship is our way of listening with the heart, of responding to God’s blessing and His call with a life of gratitude.

- True Christian disciples live out their stewardship through tangible practices of sharing their resources of time, talent, and treasure:
  - Time. - All of our time should be God-centered, which means using our time to honor God.
    - God calls us to set aside a portion of our week to focus on strengthening our relationship with God through quiet prayer, Mass, reading and studying the scriptures.
    - God wants us to dedicate a certain amount of time each day to draw closer to Him, to be active in our building our relationship by being passive before Him.
    - This time with God then can serve as the foundation for everything else that we do outside of our prayer.
  - Talent - We should assess our strengths and determine how they might be used to help build the kingdom of God.
    - Each of us has been gifted in extraordinary ways and can perform some action to help others, especially within the context of the needs of our community.
    - God has given us these talents not merely for ourselves but to help others as well and
    - It's even built into our DNA. A recent article in the New York Times confirmed that giving back, helping others is good for those who give and can have a profound impact on the giver's health as well as his or her outlook.
    - Scientific evidence supports the idea that acts of generosity can be beneficial when we volunteer and give back regularly. Volunteering is linked to health benefits like lower blood pressure and decreased mortality rates.

- Treasure.
  - This is what most think of immediately when they hear a priest talking about stewardship and perhaps it's what we think is the most personal.
  - Jesus spent a good deal of time talking about how we handle our finances because He knows how difficult, indeed how dangerous, our stewardship of finances can be.
  - Stewardship of treasure is planning to return the first portion of our earnings to God as a way of showing our gratitude and commitment to Christ and to the Church.
  - Tithing, giving the first 10% of the treasure we have received, is the traditional, Biblical guideline of what God has repeatedly asked of us.
  - Stewardship calls us to give in proportion to our blessings by sharing a percentage of our gifts with others and using the remainder to live my life as a disciple of Jesus Christ.
  
- None of this is easy but we do not do it alone.
  - In our first reading, the Prophet Malachi reminded us that God is with us, that it is God who leads us and will take care of us even when those who lead us (read our priests and pastors) do not glory His name.
  - Isaiah reminded us several weeks running in some way, shape or form, that only God is the LORD; there is no other, no God besides Him. It is God who strengthens us even when we are not aware and it is God our loving Father who calls us by name, takes us by the hand and helps us to do good.

- And Saint Paul so beautifully reminds us, in one of my favorite passages that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.
  
- Aware that we are called by Christ to make a return to God, to give to God what is God's, that stewardship is exacting and difficult but that we do not do it alone, the question remains, "Practically how does it happen?"
  - I ask you to reflect prayerfully on what is God's? On what God has given you? On God's love for you?
  - And then, I ask you also to reflect prayerfully, think carefully about your giving back to God. What return does your giving represent for all of the gifts God has poured out on you?
  - How well do you follow the command of Jesus to practice what you preach, of His recent exhortation to give to God what is God's?
  - Think about your time and your talent and your treasure.
    - Do you share with God some of the moments God has given to you? Do you make time for God everyday? Do you offer God the sacrifice of a few minutes in quiet prayer or the reading of scripture? Sure everyone is busy and some things are more urgent, but nothing is more necessary.
    - Do you share with God through our community the talents and strengths God has given you?
    - Does your financial giving to our community and to other causes reflect a percentage of all God has given?

- I know that some of you are giving at capacity of your time, talent, and treasure, even beyond capacity. For that, I thank you. We could not succeed without such generosity.
- But others are giving only a little, only from excess, only when it's available.
- And, sadly, many are not giving at all.
- It is never about the amount of time, talent or treasure one gives but about the way one gives it.
- The prophet Malachi reminds us in our first reading that our blessings can become curses if we do not use them to glorify God's name, if we keep them selfishly, if we don't share them.
- Perhaps you've not reviewed your giving in a while. Perhaps you've never thought about it before as life decision, rather than only a financial one.
- So I ask each of you to reflect on where you fall in this scale, to reflect on your gift of time, talent and treasure and on what kind of return it demonstrates for all the Lord has given you.
- Some will rest easy in the reflection; others may be a little uncomfortable.
  
- Especially for those who are uncomfortable, I ask you to remember the Lord's generosity in your lives and to take steps to trust in the Lord with your return.
  - Right now, if you're not giving at all in any of these areas, think about giving something, anything. No gift is too small and everyone can give something in each of those areas.

- Currently the financial burden is borne by only about 1/3 of our parishioners and the burden of service is borne by an even smaller amount. If everyone gave something, we could share that burden.
- If you're already giving but only from your excess each week, giving financially only from pocket change or throwing God a minute here or there, helping out only when you have free time, plan your gift instead. Think about what you can give every week and then commit yourself to giving that amount of time, talent and treasure.
- Once you are planning and giving your gift every week every, take the next step. Make God a priority, putting God before anything and everything every else. Everyone can do that, regardless of the size of offering.
- Then, even as you give of your time and your talent, also take the next step financially and give a percentage of your income rather than a set dollar amount. Initially, it's not about what the percentage is so much as the fact that it is a percent.
- Percentage giving is a major cultural shift and can come as a shock to the system as I found out 7 years ago when I first started doing it myself. I realized that I could not preach to you if I was not practicing it myself so I sat down with our business manager as I prepared to do this homily. I thought I was close to the 10% mark, maybe even surpassing it. But I wasn't. It was closer to 3% which included all of my giving. A shock, certainly and a reminder that we can never rest on our laurels. I sat down again just this past month to review and increase upward my percentage to make sure it reflects an proper return to the Lord.

- It will be difficult but the final step is to increase that percentage until your total giving is a tithe, the biblical reference of 10%.
  
- Such a demanding call for such a strong return is not a very easy or comfortable position. But it is about putting on Christ, about wearing our Christianity, about giving back to God what is God's, about listening with the heart.
  - Harsh but true, making clear what the Gospel infers. Practicing what we preach about God's gifts reminds us that stewardship is serious business with other-worldly consequences.
  - If we do not recognize that all comes from God and should be returned to Him we cannot hope to rejoice fully in the love God has for us right now and, dare I say it, share in the intimacy of God's love in heaven.
  - As so many of you know already, yes, stewardship represents a sacrifice but giving, even as it hurts, can bring joy, both to the one who give and to those who receive the Gospel because of it.
  - Your giving helps us to make known to others the generosity of God who calls all of us, each of us to share in the wedding banquet.
  
- Next week, we are going to ask you to demonstrate how you “give to God what is God's” indicating how you will return God's love for you in your time, talent, and treasure, in what you give to the Lord and to this community, both financially and in service.
  
- Listen. Listen for God's call to be generous. Listen with your heart.