



Do you know what this is? ... It's a walking or hiking stick – to help me keep my balance when on rough terrain or to give me more power by changing the angle of my arms (which uses more calories), and it can even be a cane if I need help with balance when not hiking.

It has 3 main parts. The grip, the main shaft and a variable shaft which permits me to change the length of the pole. Today is the first Sunday in our pledge season. It is a time of the year when we specifically discern what God is doing in our lives individually and at and through St. John's in terms of money. We have moved away from calling these 6

weeks "stewardship" because we have come to acknowledge that stewardship is a 365 day/ 24-7 necessity if we are to live out our faith. Just as our faith is not limited to Sunday mornings, stewardship of God's creation is not limited to 6 weeks a year. At the same time, it is good to have a dedicated, intentional period of time to review how we are working to make God's kingdom a reality on this earth. To ensure that God's mission is one we are doing our best to live into.

As we understand our part of God's mission, we have expressed it in the St. John's vision statement:

*"We are committed to God, to our church, and to each other as a family in Christ, providing and cherishing spiritual growth, and living our faith in the community at large."*

Our pledge drive helps make this mission possible. Money follows mission and when we are clear about our mission then we can trust God to provide the money necessary to provide spiritual growth, to enable us to live our faith in the community at large and to strengthen the commitment we have made to God, to our church and to each other as a family in Christ.

God's mission is not static, though. As our world changes so our part in the world changes. Our need for resources changes. Each year, then, we take a few weeks to step back, discern and reflect on the past year and discern the way forward for the coming year. That time is now.

It can be easy to simply say "last year I gave "x" and so this year I will give "x" without taking into account what St. John's has meant to us and to our community – and how we have been part of bringing God's kingdom to earth in the past year. Maybe simply continuing to do what you have always done is appropriate. However, I believe taking time to reflect, to pray, and to discern a way forward is a worthwhile use of our gifts and talents, let alone our treasure.

The grip of my walking stick can be compared to the gifts and talents that God has given each of us. It is integral to who I am: I put my hand through the strap and adjust it to fit my hand. Your fit would be different because our hands are different- our gifts and talents are different. But we each need a grip. The grip connects me to the walking stick. Without some kind of grip, it is just a stick that can easily slip away and be no good to me. The grip connects me to the walking

stick. It enables my muscles to tell the stick where to go in front or to the side or me. It helps my forward progress. The grip or my gifts and talents connect me to God. They keep me centered and focused. And, they can change as my life changes. I am not the same size I was when I was age 6 and likely not the same size I will be at age 75. My hands and thus the grip need to be adjusted as things change. Fundamentally, though, the gifts and talents remain the same whatever else changes. They can deepen if I will pay attention to them. They can be used just for me or for the wider good if I am willing to step out in faith.

The middle piece of the walking stick- the top part of the pole- is stable and sturdy. It is the bridge between the grip and the movable part – the inner shaft. You might look at this part of the shaft as time. The prophet Jeremiah tells us in Chapter 29 that God knows the plans that God has for us; plans to prosper us, plans to give us hope and a future (Jer. 29:11). Psalm 139, verse 16, says that God knows our days before we are born. Thus, the middle part of the shaft, the fixed part, might be said to be the time God has given me on earth. The middle part of the shaft can be dinged or bruised or cut – rarely when used for a period of time does it stay pristine. That’s a lot like our life. It’s not always smooth sailing with every part of it looking like it did fresh out of the box.

The third main part of my walking stick is variable. It can be longer or shorter, depending upon the need and the use I make of the walking stick. This variable part might be said to be analogous to our treasure. Our money, our financial resources. Sometimes we may have a lot. Other times we may have a little. This part of the walking stick is also connected to the grip- talents- and the main shaft-time. And thus we have: time, talent and treasure.

Paul, in writing to Timothy, reminds Timothy to rekindle the gift of God that is within him and within each of us. Make sure that your hand is seated firmly in the grip and the strap is smooth to ensure that you don’t slip. And then strike out confident that God has given you the talents you need for the life you will lead. And that you can learn and adapt as you go and as new opportunities are presented to you.

Paul goes on to remind Timothy that God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. That main shaft, sturdy and strong, gives us what we need to live for as long as our days will be. It may become scratched or dented or even cut, but it connects us to God, who is the source of our life and our very being.

And, having been given talents and life from God, Paul then urges Timothy to not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord. Do not be ashamed or fearful to give of your treasure to enable the mission of God in and through St. John’s.

The disciples cry out to Jesus “increase our faith.” Their fears and uncertainties are evident in this plea. Each of us has likely had some incident in our life where what we believed about life to that point was challenged. Or our hopes and dreams seemed to be washing away even as we were not ready to let them go. We can feel lost, hopeless, alone. Increase our faith, they cry- if

only we had more, things would be better we think. Humans love to measure things- think about the thermometer image that so often is used to tell us how we are doing with the fund-raising drive. It can guilt us into giving more because we want to reach the goal. Increase your gift and all will be well with your world might be the message those thermometers send. But is that the right reason to give? I think not. Guiltting someone into giving more isn't what Jesus is all about. Money follows mission.

But Jesus does not give them a recipe to have more faith. Rather, Jesus gives them a mission. Go and make disciples in all the world (Mt. 28:19). Feed the hungry. Clothe the naked. Visit the sick and those in prison. This is God's mission – this is our mission.

Increase our faith. The answer is not whether I have a cupful of faith or a gallon of faith (whatever that would look like). The issue is who my faith is in. Is my faith in Jesus? Do I believe in God's mission to help heal the world? And if I do, then what percentage of my financial resources will I give to St. John's to enable St. John's to live out that mission?

Give because you believe in God's mission. Give out of the generosity that has been given to you. Give to help St. John's be the light to the world that it is capable of being. Give to acknowledge the One who gave everything for us.