

Dear Friends,

Five loaves. Two fish. Five thousand hungry people.

It is one of the most familiar stories in the Gospel of Matthew, and yet every time we hear it, there is something new to discover. The disciples look at the crowd and see an impossible need. They look at the food they have and see that it is nowhere near enough. But Jesus sees something different. "*Bring them here to me"* he says.

And when those small gifts are placed in Jesus' hands, something extraordinary happens. What seemed insufficient becomes abundant. What looked like too little becomes more than enough. The disciples distribute the bread and fish, and ***everyone*** is fed by their gifts, in God's hands.

As we begin our annual stewardship campaign at St. Mark's Episcopal Church, I invite you to reflect not only on what we are being asked to give, but on what God has already done with the gifts of generations of faithful people who have come before us. For 180 years**,** St. Mark's has been a place where ordinary gifts become extraordinary blessings. Remember all the people who have walked through these doors over the decades: generations of children baptized and confirmed, couples who have exchanged vows, families who have gathered around the altar in thanksgiving and in grief. Think of the people who have come seeking forgiveness, healing, hope, and a place to belong.

Remember the meals that have been shared, the ministries that have been created, the people who have been welcomed, the neighbors who have been served, and the countless lives that have been touched by this parish. Think of the prayers that have been offered here. None of it happened because one person had everything that was needed. It happened because people brought what they had and placed it in God's hands.

St. Mark's has witnessed hurricanes and storms, seasons of prosperity and seasons of uncertainty, moments of joy and moments of profound sorrow. Through it all, God has continued to work through this community of faith. That is the miracle. And perhaps the greatest miracle is that God continues to invite us into this holy work. Stewardship is our response to that invitation.

When we offer our time, our talents, our prayers, and our financial resources to God, we may sometimes wonder whether our individual gifts can really make a difference. Like the disciples looking at five loaves and two fish, we can easily convince ourselves that what we have is simply not enough. But Jesus does not ask us to provide everything. He asks us simply to bring the gifts and blessings we have. "*Bring them here to me"* he says.

Over the next few weeks, I hope you will prayerfully consider what gifts you can offer at St. Mark's for the coming year. Your pledge helps sustain the worship, ministries, outreach, formation, fellowship, and mission of this parish. But even more importantly, your pledge is an act of faith.

It says: "*I believe in what God is doing here."*

It says: "*I believe that the story of St. Mark's is not simply something we inherit from the past, but something we are called to continue."*

And it says: "*I am willing to place what I have in God's hands."*

We cannot know all that God will do with our gifts. The disciples certainly could not have imagined what would happen when they handed Jesus those five loaves and two fish. But we do know this: God has a remarkable history of taking what we offer and using it to accomplish far more than we could have imagined. For 180 years, St. Mark's has been one of those miracles. Now it is our turn to add our gifts to the story.

May we give generously. May we give joyfully. May we give prayerfully. And may we trust that when our gifts are placed in God's hands, there will always be enough for the work God has called us to do. Thank you for your faithfulness to St. Mark's, for your generosity, and for the many ways you make this parish a living witness to the love of Christ. I look forward to discovering together what God will do with "**Our gifts in God's hands**."

Peace+



The Very Rev. Stephen W. Kidd
Rector, St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Gulfport, Mississippi

Prayer for Stewardship

Loving God, I come to you in thanksgiving, knowing that all I am and all that I have is a gift from you. In faith and love, help me to do your will. Give me the wisdom and insight to understand your will for me and the fervor to fulfill my good intentions. I offer my gifts of time, talent and wealth to you as a true act of faith, to reflect my love for you and my neighbor. Help me to reach out to others as you have reached out to me, in Jesus' name. **Amen.**