Should the Clergy Know What I Give?

The earth and everything in it, the world and its inhabitants, belong to the Lord. — Psalm 24:1

Luke 9 Then he said to them all, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?’

Matthew 19 Then someone came to him and said, ‘Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?’ And he said to him, ‘Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.’ He said to him, ‘Which ones?’ And Jesus said, ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honour your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ The young man said to him, ‘I have kept all these; what do I still lack?’ Jesus said to him, ‘If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Freedom from the idolatry of money, for a Christian, means that money becomes useful only as a sacrament—as a sign of the restoration of life wrought in this world by Christ. The sacramental use of money has little to do with supporting the church after the manner of contributing to conventional charities and even less with the self-styled stewardship that solicits funds mainly for the maintenance of ecclesiastical salaries and the housekeeping of church properties. . . . The offertory is integral to the sacramental existence of the church, a way of representing the oblation of the totality of life to God. No more fitting symbol of the involvement of Christians in the everyday life of the world could be imagined, in American society at least, than money, for nearly every relationship in personal and public life is characterized by the obtaining or spending or exchange of money. If then, in worship, human beings offer themselves and all of their decisions, actions, and words to God, it is well that they use money as the witness to that offering. Money is, thus, used sacramentally within the church and not contributed as to some charity or given because the church, as such, has any need of money.

The sacramental use of money in the formal and gathered worship of the church is authenticated—as are all other churchly sacramental practices—in the sacramental use of money in the common life of the world. . . . The charity of Christians in the use of money sacramentally—in both the liturgy and in the world—has no serious similarity to conventional charity but is always a specific dramatization of the members of the Body of Christ losing their life in order that the world be given life. For members of the church, therefore, it always implies a particular confession that their money is not their own because their lives are not their own but, by the example of God’s own love, belong to the world.

It is often asked, among the many questions we ask regarding money, and our collective lives in the Church, if the clergy should know what a person pledges in a congregation. I have said, and I believe, that it is spiritual and pastoral malpractice for them not to know. Of course, this does not match our Western sensibilities about money. In that realm it is a private matter, only to be discussed, if at all, with the closest of friends or family. But I would argue, though that be the way we engage, or fail to engage, this issue in our public and secular lives, when it comes to following the way of Jesus, we are called, as we are with many practices of the faith, to a different stance and a different practice.

In order to answer this question I believe I have to first share a bit about how I see money in relation to our Christian faith and my practice around it. I don’t believe any of this because the church needs money. I don’t believe your salvation has anything to do with a pledge, how much you pledge, whether you give at all. I want to be very clear about that. What I do believe, and Jesus knew it too, speaking on this topic specifically more than any other in Scripture, over 60 times in the New Testament, that money is a spiritual issue. We can be freed from it, so we can go deeper in our relationship with God, or we can be slave to it, and put barriers between us and God. It is not about our salvation or the grace of God given to us, that is assured. It is about our liberty, and freedom, and building the capacity in us to take more of God in. So, in short, I see the tithe and giving as a practice of Christianity, and a very important one.

The Scriptures above are just a few that I could choose regarding possessions and money. Most of these are troubling to the Western, United States, mindset around possessions and money. Surely, in its purest reality, we are not called to literally put everything we own out on the curb and walk away. At the same time we can spiritualize these passages to the point of making them completely irrelevant, dumbing them down to the conclusion they don’t apply to us, in this world, now.

However, the pull of money, possessions, ownership, was just as real in Jesus’ time as it is today. If there is anything truly human, about humans, it is this. In fact, Jesus did come and say that the proscribed percentage for the era he lived, for giving to the work of the faith, was 10%, a tithe. But, Jesus said that is not enough. Jesus was clear that God is not asking for just 10%, because 10% is not the full commitment which will bring you deeper into the Kingdom of God. Jesus changed the equation. All of Jesus teaching is based on the belief that God desires 100%, all of it, everything. Jesus asked us to give our whole selves, everything we own, all our possessions to him. Now, most of us would say that is literally impossible for us to do as well. So, what of these Gospel challenges for us today?

I would say one way we do this is by seeing what we, in this world, own or hold, in a radically different way from the way the world teaches us. I believe Christians, by the very vows we make to follow in this faith, are called to see everything in their possession on this earth as not their own, but of and from God. This is what it means to be a steward. As Christians, we are not owners any longer, but instead we are stewards of those things that have come to us by the grace of God, to be cared for by us which include our money, our possessions, even those we love who are in our care. None of it, I believe, is any longer mine, it is instead God’s, and I have been called by God to be a steward of it. In that sense, we can give up all, not by succumbing to the world’s notion of money but by giving up our notion of ownership and replacing it with the act of stewardship.

Money is actually a neutral subject. It is not bad or good. All of the notions we have about it, that it should not be discussed with others, that it is completely a private matter, that money in the church is an “icky” subject to discuss, are all feelings we have projected upon it. Money’s power is something we can let go of and change. And I believe this is the way we follow those Scriptures above, and the call of Jesus on our lives, in this economy of the world we live in. We do it, by giving up the notion of ownership, and giving up the pretenses we have about it.
The Church, the Way of Jesus, the Body of Christ is not the Rotary Club, or the Ballet, nor is it therapy, or psychology. It is the collective body, the community, we choose to be part of in order to learn, and grow into, disciples, followers, of Jesus.

In our society money has tremendous power over us. Every person who lives on this planet is marinated in the reality of having it, not having it, wishing for more of it, finding ways to make more of it. Almost any scenario in our lives, good or bad, comes back to it in some way. We give it the most power by keeping it secret and private.

In short, when it comes to money and being a Christian, I would say it is personal, but it is never private. It has been my practice to tell my congregation, and this diocese, exactly what I give, by percentage and by amount. I do not expect you to do anything I am not willing to do myself. In 2018 my wife and I together, will give about $22,800 to the church and other charities. 10% to the Church and about 3% more to other charities. We have remembered the church in our wills and will give to it, out of our modest estate, when we die. Of all the ways I spend my money, I love this one the most.

I am going to tackle this question you are wrestling with by putting out some of the arguments and simply stating my thoughts on them.

**If the priest knows he/she might treat us differently**

This is where I might agree with many who are against the priest knowing because most that are against it start with the issue of trust and I would totally agree with that. This all does come down to trust. I just believe that a congregation that flatly states a priest will not see the pledges is beginning with distrust, enshrining it, making distrust a policy. If you can’t trust the person you are calling to pastor the congregation, to be your spiritual and pastoral leaders, see a pledge made by you to the church, you have much bigger problems than this issue. If the priest you call is not able to hold this knowledge and yet pastor the church equally, we need to be talking about a lot more than this.

In my over 35 years in this church, serving as Treasurer, Sr. Warden, Deacon, Priest, and Bishop I have not heard of one case where the priest was charged with treating someone differently, pastoring them differently, because of their pledge. What I have witnessed is the power, and the damage, keeping this information from them can have both pastorally and spiritually. It is often the case that some of the biggest complainers and disrupters in a congregation are also the least generous with it with time, talent, or money. So, it can go that way too. If you fear either side of this coin, the greatest vaccine against it is more transparency, not less.

**Money should be confidential and private**

As I attempted to outline above, I believe this is the world’s view, but I don’t believe it our Christian view. When Jesus calls us to leave all and follow him, the only way we can legitimately do that today is by shifting our views on what it is that is truly “ours” and by taking the power away from money, for ourselves, and in our faith community. As I say above, when we vow to Christianity, I believe this is still very personal, but I don’t believe it is private any longer.

Again, our silence about money only gives it power. The great leveler here is more transparency, not secrecy.

**People should not be coerced into giving or having someone see it**
No one is. You made a choice to be part of a Christian community. That community can decide what values it hold, how it will pastorally care for those in that community, what expectations it has of those who seek deeper membership in the community. No one is coerced to be part of that in any way. No one is coerced to pledge. This issue you all are struggling with, what you will do personally, whether or not you will be part of the community is all a choice. Indeed, I have already heard some using the typical tactic here, “this will either be decided the way I want it, or I will take all my marbles and go home.” That too, is a choice.

**Why does the priest need to see it?**

I stated above that I see a priest not knowing this information as spiritual and pastoral malpractice. I believe that for several reasons. I believe money is a spiritual issue. Nothing that is so pervasive in a society in which we swim and live daily can be otherwise. You cannot separate this out. So, money can often be the only warning sign a priest receives. Seeing a suddenly generous person stop being generous, or even one becoming vastly more generous, are all signs. It can be a sign of a need for help, of a simmering anger, or of many other issues. If you want a priest to pastor you, they need all the tools to know this. We do not call priests to simply be your chaplain. We call them to be pastors, to oversee the souls in their care. I believe that requires the utmost trust, and the utmost care, and the utmost knowledge and insight in order to do.

There is also a canonical reason. Title IV within the Canons of the Episcopal Church are the disciplinary canons for clergy. Those things which are required of clergy and which they oversee are delineated here. One of the ways a cleric can become subject to, and in violation of, this canon is by not having proper financial oversight of their congregations. As a clergy person, this is one reason I would not lead any church as rector/vicar without this issue being clear up front. I will, and always have had, access to all financial records. By the same token, if it could be proven that a priest decided to treat those not pledging, or those pledging less, or for whatever reason based on giving, differently than others that would also be grounds for discipline under this canon. In my 11 years as Bishop that has never been alleged by anyone. However, I have now, and have had several times along the way, a priest under a pastoral directive by me because they had not oversee the financial well being of the parish properly. And whether we like it or not, our priests now are not simply pastoral leaders, they are, in many ways, non-profit managers, and so they are charged with seeing this information and with holding it confidential and not having it influence their pastoral and spiritual care of the congregation.

In short, I believe not wanting the priest to see the pledges is more about our fears, not the reality of trust or what that knowledge might cause. In fact, in most cases, once the furor you are experiencing in deciding this is over, it is rarely if ever known or talked about again.

**Is the Bishop making us do this?**

The short answer is no. Your Vestry came to me and my staff with this question. I have tried to answer it. Some on my staff have done the same. I cannot make a priest follow my beliefs on this but I will say that many will not accept a call where the policy is otherwise. I cannot make you or your Vestry adopt or not adopt this policy. Your vestry, as your elected representative, and them alone can make this decision. Do we have priests that believe otherwise? Yes. But a majority believe and practice what I have spelled out above.

I want to be as clear about all of this as I can be. I am more than willing to answer other questions. I most certainly have not answered them all here, and for some, not at all.
I want to also commend your Vestry for taking up a difficult discussion. I believe it is an important one, and one that no matter what is decided will benefit all in it. I hope you will consider that most of our congregations do this, but also most never really talk about any of this anymore, because day to day, this is not an issue. I would urge you to think about, for yourself, why this issue is bringing up so much angst. To assess what this is really about.

All of you are in my prayers. Blessings to each and every one of you. +Greg Rickel