

**Proper 25, Year A**  
**The Rev. Martha L. Hubbard**

**October 26, 2008**  
**St. Paul's, Newburyport, MA**

This past Monday we paused during the business of our vestry meeting to check in on how life has been going for us recently. We framed the check-in with the question, "*What has it been like to be a disciple of Jesus this past month?*" I began by saying that for me it had been a month during which I have felt anxious. There is so much uncertainty in our world right now. Who will be our next president in this country? How will the undulations of markets affect the world community? What about the global warming? What about war in Iraq and other parts of our world? Anxious questions swirl around me as I go about my work as priest and pastor and I have felt that anxiety intensely at times over this past month.

Jesus lived in anxious times too. Questions swirled around him as he went about his ministry. This morning's Gospel lesson brings a close to the 22<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Matthew's Gospel - a chapter that is full of questions. In this chapter the Pharisees and Sadducees ask Jesus questions about taxes, remarriage and finally, in this passage, they ask him which commandment is the greatest. Embroiled in their anxiety over the fact that Jesus does not fit with their vision of the Messiah who would rescue the Jewish people

from the oppressing forces of Rome, these faithful yet anxious people seek to prove Jesus an imposter. They question, they test, they seek to entrap. But his answer to this final question leaves them not daring to question him further. He tells them:

*"`You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: `You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."*

This answer is a show stopper. It draws the questioners up short, by calling them back to the very heart of their faith. Love of God and neighbor.

Last Monday night, during our Vestry meeting I asked the Vestry, your elected leaders, a question. I asked whether they thought we should undertake some belt tightening measures financially as a stewardship response in these turbulent financial times. Their response was to say that they have been engaged in that process over the last several years. Budgets have been carefully constructed recently to keep the parish living within its means. Many good efforts have already been undertaken to economize. For instance we have converted all our lighting fixtures to high efficiency

bulbs - an effort that has cut our electricity consumption by 20%. And to thanks to some restricted gifts given to the parish over the years by Sylvia and Wilhelmina Lunt, we are just about to replace our ancient furnaces with two high efficiency gas powered units that have the potential to cut our heating bills by \$15,000 a year. Not only do these economizing efforts save us financial resources, they also make us greener and much friendlier to the blessed gift of the natural world around us.

So, the general feeling on the vestry was that our message of stewardship this year need not be focused on belt tightening. Rather, several vestry members spoke about the need for us to be bold in our ministry in Christ's name. Not to shrink back, but to claim the hopeful confidence that is ours in Christ, and to be a place of resource and compassion to those in our world who will need us more than ever. Now is the time to make more room at the Among Friends tables. Now is the time to fill the food basket for Pettingill House. Now is the time to move forward with our plan to form a global outreach partnership. Now is not a time to give in to anxiety. Rather now is the time to engage, and deepen our commitment to be ministers of Christ's grace. That night your lay leaders were preaching to the preacher. They reminded me that the heart

of the matter is Love of God and Love of neighbor, just like Jesus said.

What a marvelous group your vestry is! Their words of earnest faith pulled me back into that place of confident hope with them.

Then later this week, I spent some time looking at the wonderful quilt squares that many of you have added to our King's quilt of blessing, and those beautiful patterns preached the same message to me. Those quilt squares are not decorated with images or words about material stuff. Rather they reveal that our collective sense of blessedness rooted in our relationships with God, with our families, friends and neighbors. Our quilt testifies that the economy of love that undergirds us and flows through us is more important to us than anything else.

And that made me remember the closing pages of the Quiltmaker's Gift. In the last pages of the book, the Quiltmaker finishes the King's quilt and goes looking for him. Then we are told: (read page on which King receives quilt)

It is the paradox of our faith that when we dare to empty ourselves in love toward God and our neighbor, we receive more blessing than we ever thought possible. May that truth lie at the heart of all that we do as stewards in this corner of Christ's kingdom. Amen+