

## ON THESE TWO COMMANDMENTS

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Jesus said, *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Matthew 22:37-40)*

A week from Tuesday New York City will be conducting a mayoral election. Unless the pollsters are completely wrong (which they have been known to be in the recent past), it seems that we will be praying for “Bill our Mayor” for another four years. Bill de Blasio is 6’5, but in terms of political stature, it is unlikely that he will ever stand as tall as one of his predecessors, who was only 5’2. I refer, of course, to Fiorello LaGuardia, who was a life-long Episcopalian and a one-time member of Grace Chapel on 14<sup>th</sup> Street. LaGuardia was the mayor of New York City during the difficult years of the Great Depression and World War Two. He was a colorful character by any reckoning.

One story has it that on a freezing winter night in January of 1935, LaGuardia showed up at night court in one of the poorest parts of the city. He relieved the judge and sat down to render decisions on the evening’s cases himself. Soon a poor old woman was brought before the mayor, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She explained that her daughter’s husband had abandoned them, leaving her sick and starving daughter and grandchildren to live with her. Despite the woman’s plea, the grocer from whom she stole the bread, refused to drop the charges, claiming that if he let her off everyone on the block will come helping themselves at his store.

LaGuardia thought for a moment. Then he pronounced his sentence, declaring that the law must be upheld: “ten dollars, or ten days in jail,” he told the old woman. But before she could react, the mayor had already reached into his pocket and produced a ten-dollar bill. He placed it on the bench as her ransom and said, “Here’s the fine, which I now remit.” Then he went on: “Furthermore, I’m going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty-cents for living in a town where someone has to steal a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant.” And so, after the Bailiff moved through the courtroom and collected the fines, he handed \$47.50 to the speechless old woman. But the most extraordinary moment was still to come. When the mayor pounded his gavel declaring the case closed, all in the courtroom – petty criminals, traffic offenders, policemen, even the grocer who brought the charges – rose to their feet gave La Guardia a sustained, rousing ovation.<sup>i</sup>

Today we launch the 2018 Pledge Campaign at Grace Church. In just a few minutes the ushers will move through the congregation collecting the tithes. It may please you to know that I have no plans to bar the doors until everyone has filled out an envelope. Nor do I have any delusions about receiving a standing ovation today. However, the Vestry and I are hoping you will aim higher than the fifty-cents that LaGuardia required of his captive audience. Why do we do this every year? Why do we ask everyone at Grace Church to make a financial pledge? Let me first tell you what a pledge to the church isn’t: it’s not a fine that God levies upon stingy, greedy people, it’s not your dues for membership at Grace Church, it’s not your fair share of the operating budget. A pledge to the church is none of these things.

This is what I believe about my annual pledge to Grace Church: it is a way for me to express my love for God. Jesus said, *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment.* So my pledge is a physical, tangible way to fulfill the first and great commandment of Jesus, and express my love for God. But some may be asking, “Why should I love God?” We can understand fearing God and obeying God, as the Pharisees did. But why should we love God? I’ll tell you why: because God first loved us. The only way to fulfill the commandment to love God is to understand how completely and how amazingly God first loved us. God is the giver of every good gift, and the source of all the blessings of this life.

What are those blessings? Earlier this week I faced the daunting task of signing hundreds of pledge campaign letters to all of our households. Hopefully you each received yours and read it. As I worked my way through the large stack of letters, signing each one and reflecting briefly upon the person it would reach, I found myself counting some of your blessings for you! I found myself thinking: here’s someone with a new job after a stretch of unemployment. Here’s another with a new house near the beach, and another with a new baby, and another with a new grandchild. Here’s a newly engaged couple who didn’t even know each other one year ago. Here’s someone, also just one year ago, who feared for health reasons that she might not even be here today. But she is. Here’s a wife and husband who found reconciliation in their marriage. Here’s a single mother raising two of the most wonderful children any parent could ever want. Here’s someone who lived through a trying year, but knew the support of the Lord all the way through it.

So what are you grateful to God for this year? You will notice that on the top side of the pledge envelope is a form asking you to list some of your particular blessings. Don’t be shy about naming the gifts of God that you have known in 2017. What you’re saying with the pledge you make today is this: “Thank you Lord, for all things bright and beautiful. I acknowledge that you are the source of them all.” Indeed, pledging is a way to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. This is the first and great commandment. And a second is like unto it: *You shall love your neighbor as your self.* How can we fulfill the second great commandment? When we realize again how much and how wonderfully God has blessed us, what else can we do but find a way to extend the love of God to our neighbors – to all creatures great and small?

Think about it this way: with your pledge you are saying that you care to all the people who will be touched by the ministries of Grace Church. You are saying that you care to the boy and girl choristers who gather here at impossibly early weekday morning hours to rehearse their music. You are saying that you care to the Sunday School student drawing a picture of Noah’s Ark, and then comes parading back into the church with magic marker all over her hands. You are saying that you care to the AA participants who meet here throughout the week and find release from addiction. You are saying that you care to the GO Project student, receiving an educational boost and thus not falling through the cracks. You are saying that you care to the homeless people who make their way to the shelters we support, and eat the meals we cook. You are saying that you care to every tourist, pilgrim, and spiritual seeker who enters our doors to rest or pray. To all of these neighbors and more your pledge can say something loud and clear: I care about you. I want to do everything in my power to provide this place, this program for you. So your pledge is a way to fulfill the two great commandments: love God with all your heart, soul, and mind; love your neighbor as yourself.

Now some thoughts on a widely misunderstood Biblical concept: tithing. Tithing is simply this: it is setting aside the first ten-percent of your income as a thank-offering to God. Some tithe on their gross income, some on their net income. But however you calculate it, know this: tithing isn’t a compulsory Biblical law to be required of unwilling people. It isn’t something you should feel obligated to do, or be guilted into doing. Tithing is something you can strive to do as an

appropriate gesture of gratitude to God, who is the giver of all things bright and beautiful. It is thanking God not with our charitable remains, not with the leftovers, but with the first and best we have to offer. But suppose you want to become a tither, and just honestly don't think you can this year. Try this: make tithing a goal. Think percentages and aim to reach the tithe, even if it means inching towards the goal by a percentage point each year. Aim to be a tither as a way of loving God and loving your neighbor.

It's important for me to share with you that we are tithers in my household. But I say this not because I'm supposed to be a tither, not because I'm proud of it, or trying to impress anyone. Rather, tithing has helped me to understand a secret that the world doesn't know, and frankly resists learning. The secret is this: the more grateful and giving a person you are, the happier you will be. The more I give, the more I seem to have. I can't explain the mechanics of it to you, but I have discovered it to be true. I believe what caused the standing ovation in Fiorello LaGuardia's courtroom was that all those people caught a glimpse of how much better it feels to give. It is more blessed to give than to spend life grabbing and clutching at earth's deceitful treasures.

If ten-percent seems like a lot to give, let me tell you about some people who gave much more – even 100-percent of themselves. Earlier this week I was at the Metropolitan Museum, and I stood transfixed before a bronze cast of six larger than life figures walking in a tightly knit group with pained, agonized expressions on their faces. Who are these morose people marching together, and where are they headed? Are they citizens of New York City, headed to the polls to vote in the mayoral election? Are they parishioners of Grace Church on their way to services on Pledge Sunday? No, they are a magnificent work of the French sculptor Auguste Rodin called *The Burghers of Calais*.

In the year 1347, during the Hundred Years' War between England and France, the city of Calais had been under a lengthy siege. Food and water inside the walls eventually gave out, and to avoid starvation the city leaders asked for terms of surrender. King Edward III of England declared that if six burghers – or, leading citizens – would present themselves to him, wearing nooses around their necks, and carrying the keys to the city, he would spare the rest of the citizens. In response, six men volunteered to give their lives so that others might live. They opened the city doors and walked through, presumably to their execution. This is the moment that Rodin captured in his work. As it turned out, Queen Philippa of England interceded on behalf of the six Burghers, and persuaded her husband, King Edward to spare their lives. The Burghers of Calais were willing to give all they had, even life itself, and behold: they received life back again, and won life for their fellow citizens.

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On these two Commandments hang all the law, and the prophets, and our pledges.

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<sup>i</sup> The story is told in a sermon entitled, "The Righteous and the Good," by James M. McCutcheon. Best Sermons 1, Harper & Row, 1986, p. 238.