*Gracious and loving God*

*You call us to be stewards of your*

*Abundance, the caretakers of all you have entrusted to us*

*Help us always to use your gifts wisely*

*And teach us to share them generously*

*Send the Holy Spirit to work through us*

*Bringing your message to those we serve*

*May our faithful stewardship bear*

*Witness to the love of Jesus Christ in our lives*

*Refresh us so that we may honor his great name.*

*Amen*.

Good morning!

I'd say most parishes begin their stewardship drives right around this time in the fall. And sometimes, I think the preachers would just like to ease into that message, you know? Perhaps elegantly weaving a thoughtful and tactful note about church giving and finance around a gentle and encouraging Biblical text.

Well, looks like the Gospel reading for the day leaves us with hilariously little room for subtlety. And honestly, I kind of hope somewhere some priest or stewardship committee has the confidence and sense of humor to title their giving program: "Just give us everything" or something in light of today's lesson from St. Mark's account. For us, I think we'll stick to the theme of refreshment, of resetting and restarting as we enjoy God's goodness working in our midst to encourage our continued growth as a parish.

But a strong teaching from Jesus like we've heard today, if we read and hear it carefully, that actually does give us a venue for refreshment in him. Which might come as a surprise on first hearing; after all it kind of sounds like Jesus is in roast mode in today's lesson. Did Jesus really make that dude cry? What did he say about a camel now?

But I don't think Jesus condemned a man for the bare fact of having many possessions and has not excluded the rich from being his disciples. He has, just like much of the rest of the Bible, pointed out that there are many things, created things, which distract from our following after God's call. Notice that when the young man told Jesus that he faithfully followed the law that Jesus responded to him in love and told him to sell his things for the benefit of the poor. Notice again that the man's response to not to argue with Jesus on Biblical grounds as a follower of the ten commandments at least. Rather, he responded with grief because he did not want to truly realign his life, (and in his case, his possessions) around Jesus' Kingdom. I often wonder if his possessions had become his god, his idol, and therefore he was unable to see that only by getting rid of the temptation would he be free to follow after the Christ who loved him.

But after Jesus spoke to this young man, he spoke to his disciples and seems to have doubled down on his word to the rich. It is harder for the rich to enter the Kingdom than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Which is to say, it's pretty difficult. The disciples, likely in a bit of existential terror ask, "But who can be saved?" And it's almost as if the question was asked for our benefit as it seemed like Jesus was setting a pretty high bar for the Kingdom. And here we get the key to what Jesus is trying to teach us. I hope you'll oblige a paraphrase of this teaching: For mortals focused on passable things (like the rich young man was), the Kingdom of Heaven is an impossible goal. But God is so powerful, that He can even break the power of the idols, even and especially the power our stuff can have over us. To follow after Christ is to participate in that power, realigning our lives, our very hearts, minds, souls, and strength towards Christ and his kingdom. To follow after Christ is to know that our stuff is not who we are. We are Christ's own first and his claim on our lives and as his disciples is primary.

At that point, Peter comes at Jesus from the other direction. "See, we've already left everything," he says, perhaps with a bit of satisfaction. And Jesus seems to say that all that will be added back, but again, reoriented around himself. Interestingly, Jesus adds persecution to the list of returns complicating matters once again. Subtly, Jesus is pointing out that Peter and his friends ought not to be concerned as much with what's going to pass away, but with what eternal reward is both given now and promised in eternity: the most heavenly treasure of Christ himself.

Beloved, Mark's gospel lesson this morning is a reminder, a refresher to the reading community that we are meant to place our greatest trust, reliance, love, loyalty, and obedience on Christ Jesus so that we may be saved from being ruled by lesser things. Today, I pray that your hearts would be thusly refreshed with zeal for Christ and his ministry, even as we humbly undertake the project of parish stewardship over the next few weeks. In just a few minutes, I’ll share a few thoughts on that topic, and I hope it’s an encouragement to you. But after that, in heading to the altar to receive the sacrament, I hope you'll carry the final verse from our Hebrews lesson with you, such that the *fullness* of Christ's encouragement and benediction would be with you for the week to come. So, "Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

To Him be all Glory; from age to age. Amen.