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All Saints by the Sea  
Stewardship Sermon  
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### **As it Ought to Be: Alaskan Bear Hunting and Life in Community**

It is a pleasure to be with you, and I appreciate this invitation to share the inauguration of your stewardship program. This is a wonderful parish doing remarkable ministry, like your involvement with Transition House, the Community Kitchen, and your missions to the Indian school in Idaho. I am excited by the devotion, the commitment, and the concern for the world that you demonstrate at All Saints by the Sea.

In thinking about this visit, I thought it might be helpful to start by telling you about a bear hunting ritual in Alaska. You might be surprised to learn that there are some similarities between our Episcopal liturgy and certain ceremonies of the indigenous people of our northernmost state. A seminary professor told this story to me, and while I can't guarantee all the details, the information on this study has been published.

Apparently, a professor at a major university was fascinated with a particular tribe in which the men, prior to their big bear hunt, would conduct an elaborate ceremony, ostensibly rehearsing the hunt before it takes place. However, instead of a literal reenactment, they sing songs and recite prayers about the wonders of nature, the bear's goodness and generosity, its willingness to give its life. As the ceremony ends, the bear throws itself on the spear, a willing sacrifice for the sake of the tribe.

As you might imagine, the interviewer was a little surprised—even confused by all this, so he asked, "Is that the way the hunt really happens?" One of the men replied, "Oh no, it's not like that at all. It's difficult, it's tiring—the bear doesn't cooperate." So the researcher asked, "Well, then why do you do it?" The hunter replied very seriously, "Because the ceremony is where we get it right—that's the way it ought to be."

As I heard that story it occurred to me that church, in a sense, is like the bear hunting ritual—this is where we get it right. Here, during our liturgy, we sing hymns and recite prayers, we celebrate the wonder of creation, we praise God's goodness and generosity, and we remember how God's son gave His life for the sake of the world.

And, as we worship, we engage each other and the world in ways that would serve us well throughout the week. We gather as a community, listen to and learn from scripture, and we pray for ourselves and for people in need.

It is here that we admit our sins and our brokenness as we ask God to forgive us and heal us. We promise to forgive others and we give alms to help the poor. We share a meal around this table, and when we leave, we proclaim our desire to love and serve the Lord. This is the way life ought to be—all the time.

It isn't, of course. The world can be difficult, trying and tiring at times, and people don't always cooperate with our good intentions. But we continue, somehow knowing that our actions are

important and make a difference to us and to others. We come to church because we believe that the commitment is meaningful and worth repeating week after week. As Episcopalians, we respond to that need in specific ways—a significant part of which is ritual.

We also are hard-wired to be in community. The Alaskans rarely hunt alone, and we can say the same of our worship. We need to be with each other. It is as groups that we engage the best qualities of human existence: compassion, cooperation, generosity, selflessness. These characteristics cannot be practiced in isolation—we must do them in relationship with others. Church helps us with that—in ways that cannot be found anywhere else.

It is at church that we are reminded that we are loved unconditionally and that God values love above all else. We learn that forgiveness and salvation are gifts, not rewards, and that God's generosity is unbounded. Church is where we seek to glorify God, not ourselves, and we do that through service and sacrifice.

This also is where we mark life's sacred moments—our baptisms, marriages, and funerals—the celebrations and transitions—our ceremonies that both humble and enrich us. This church is holy—it has been hallowed by the tears, the laughter, the prayers and the presence of generations of people worshipping at All Saints by the Sea. This is where we, today, along with every Christian throughout history, become the Body of Christ.

Church is, perhaps, most of all about transformation. It is as the Body of Christ that we strive to advance the kingdom of God on earth. This is where we learn to be Christ, for each other and for the world. It is here—through worship, prayer, and our gifts of substance and service—that we grow in our relationship with God and each other, following in Christ's footsteps.

It isn't easy to follow Christ, especially in a world where economic and social pressures almost compel us to value our selves and others by how much we own or where we live. Incessant messages tell us that youth and beauty and material success are the most important things in life. They're not—I tried them once.

But even when we know the messages aren't true, there is a subliminal effect we can't avoid, and our culture is dismissive of people who don't meet the approved standard—immigrants are treated with indifference, victims of violence are told they get what they deserve. We need the church to remind us that our blessings come from God and that our material wealth is largely an accident of birth. As well-fed, well-educated Americans, we enjoy opportunities that just aren't available to people born in Darfur, or rural Mexico, or the south side of Chicago, or the barrio in Santa Barbara.

We need church because without our time together—the worship, the prayers, the gifts of service and money—this world would be a pretty ugly place. We go to church for our benefit—this is where we grow in love, compassion, and generosity. We come here because we know that our relationships—the ones we have with God and each other—are the most valuable commodities on this planet. Without them we would be immeasurably poor, regardless of our financial status.

I have come to believe that God created us as loving and caring people—designed to give generously of ourselves, just like God does. There's a reason it feels good to be loving, compassionate, and generous—we were built that way. When we act the way we were made, we come closest to being like God—and that's when life is most joyous and fulfilling. Selfishness just doesn't give us the same satisfaction.

Church is an opportunity to be our best—to practice becoming the kind of people God made us to be. When we worship, this is our chance to get it right—to prepare our life the way it ought to be.

I look forward to hearing about your Consecration Sunday on October 21 and the celebration of your generous giving to the ministries of this parish. Each of us has our own definition of generosity, but whatever yours might be, I would ask that you raise that bar—substantially. If you have the capacity to double your pledge, I pray that you will consider just how much good that might do—not just for the church, but also for your own spiritual health. By giving generously of ourselves, we affirm that we are more than the sum of what we own.

All Saints by the Sea ministers in important and meaningful ways—ministries for which you should feel justifiably proud. They deserve your support. But you deserve the joy, the satisfaction, and the peace that only a truly generous heart can know.

I pray your gifts to this church express your love for God—the value you place on this community—your gratitude to all the people, past and present, who have sanctified this parish—and your desire to keep growing in your relationships with God, each other, and the world. May your presence here, your commitment to Christ and his service, and your gifts of time, love, and money—bring you great joy. That is how we get giving right—that's the way it ought to be.