Giving / The Green Light

Whoops! The Visa bill just arrived. So how generous can I afford to be in my giving to St. Matthew’s? [Full disclosure: I already turned in my pledge – probably a good thing – so now I am stuck with it.] But the question remains.

It’s instructive to see what I think – thought! – I could afford. No problem with the dentist for the annual tooth cleaning, or even the tab for the fancy family dinner out to celebrate a milestone birthday for my wife Lyn, and probably by the same reckoning the silver pendant for our daughter’s half-century birthday. “Thinking always of others” is a favorite mantra of mine, though I note greeted with a certain weary skepticism by other members of the household. But the number of breakfasts out? Or visits to Target? And let’s not even mention Barnes & Noble and other bookstore charges.

In my younger and more vulnerable years I was given a piece of advice that I have been turning over in my mind ever since. As a fledgling second lieutenant an older and more experienced officer warned me that money and alcohol were the two areas where you can get yourself into trouble the quickest, because in both cases the gap between where you think you are and where you really are yawns the widest.

In other words, one of the many benefits of the annual pledge campaign is that it makes us take a serious and deliberate look at the often unnoticed spending patterns we fall into. Where in the scale of values do we put belonging and supporting the St. Matthew’s community – the caring, the music, the preaching, the special services as well as the regular Sunday and mid-week gatherings, the friendships, the sheer joy of being a part of a thriving and healthy church? It seems to me these things matter far more than a good many of the other items we manage to work into our household economy.

It’s so easy to take church for granted, since it’s “always there,” and forget that it’s always there only because we and many others before us have been willing to give it priority in our financial decisions. At that point generosity seems to be no longer a duty or even an expectation, but rather a happy opportunity to say thanks, and to go splashing in the fountain together.

John Lawyer

[With thanks to F. Scott Fitzgerald. Maybe it’s something in the St. Paul water.]