

Horcruxes, podcasts, and singleness of heart: A stewardship sermon  
Preached by Kyle Matthew Oliver at St. Paul's Parish  
Proper 24, Year A, October 19, 2014  
(**Isaiah 45:1-7**; Psalm 96:1-9; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; **Matthew 22:15-22**)

Of all the profoundly adult spiritual insights J. K. Rowling explores in the Harry Potter series, the most fascinating to me is an object the wizards call a horcrux. Over the course of the series, we learn that the seemingly immortal dark lord has maintained his grasp on earthly life by dividing his soul into pieces and hiding them in objects of personal and social resonance.

These objects become both the signs and the anchors of his twisted power and indeed his very existence. Our heroes' shared journey is a race to find and destroy the horcruxes before doing battle, one last time, with what's left of the man himself.

If there's a sense of inevitability as the seven books pile up, it comes not from the vague idea that good is going to triumph over evil but from the specific notion that the Dark Lord Voldemort is a house divided against himself. He has passed beyond any unity between his actions and his humanity. He may be single-minded, but he lacks the virtues named in our Rite II post-communion prayer: "gladness and singleness of heart."

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It's tough to read the entire Harry Potter saga in a self-aware way without reflecting on the horcruxes we create in our own lives, the vessels into which we pour our own divided souls according to an alchemy that will always leave us diminished.

A bank account can become a horcrux, or a smartphone. The perfect home, or body, or professional portfolio. Dare I say a bookshelf? Dare I say a church building? And yet we know that no earthly object was meant to contain our souls, not even our earthly bodies in the end.

Only the very heart of God can contain, uphold, and embrace our fullness. There is no lesser altar onto which we should pour out the sacrifice of our lives. In a sense, the alignment of *our* intentions with God's will be our very salvation.

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The biblical writer known to scholars as Second Isaiah profoundly understands singleness of heart, of purpose, of vision. Twice in these seven verses we hear the following words: "I am the Lord, and *there is no other*."

That's not just an empty refrain. This passage declares that the creator of the universe is also at the center of human affairs. Cyrus the Great, who didn't know the God of Israel from Adam, has become God's chosen servant. A foreign conqueror has been selected to show the whole world that there is no other God but the LORD.

We see no division here between the political and the spiritual, between the economic and the religious. It's a unitive vision of our world. Everything belongs to God and will serve God's ultimate purposes.

Jesus, too, warns us about dividing our souls into pieces, about parcelling out our loyalties, about sectioning off the difficult parts of our lives. Recall his admonition that "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other." (6:24).

Against that backdrop, it's peculiar at first to hear today's gospel saying, about giving to Caesar what what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God. And then we remember that our coins may not bear God's image, *but we do*. What does God expect from us? Our very selves, our souls and bodies, our wholeness.

Isaiah, Matthew, and our Lord agree: In the life of faith, the question is never "God or ..." or even "God and ..." but rather and finally "God in ..." If Jesus gives a "God and ..." answer to a "God or ..." question, it is only to make a "God in ..." point: "Give to God the things that are God's," and remember that that is everything.

Our God who is *in all* wants us to be *all in*.

That doesn't mean Jesus is raising the biblical tithe to 100%. It does mean that God should be fully present in our budgeting process and our giving decisions. God wants our full awareness, our full commitment, an all-embracing relationship of love and service.

Even if it meant giving zero dollars to the church, I guarantee you that God would rather have that fullness than ten percent of any sum given without a second thought to its impact on the church's mission or our individual discipleship. But to be *all in* in spirit, most of us need to give substantially of our time, talent, *and* treasure.

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I'm wary of stewardship sermons that seem to let the preacher off the hook, so here's a personal example that helped make this idea real for me this week. I have long been an admirer and user of

WorkingPreacher.org, an online sermon preparation resource from Luther Seminary. It is an effort of incredible scope and quality. Almost 300 scholars from dozens of schools have contributed more than 2,000 commentaries on weekly readings. And the commentaries are just the beginning.

The real inspiration to me is the Sermon Brainwave podcast, a collaboration of four Luther Seminary professors. For those of you who don't know, a podcast is like a radio show whose episodes can be individually downloaded for on-demand and often on-the-go listening.

I produce a biweekly podcast as part of my work at Virginia Seminary. We've been at it for a year or so and just recorded episode 25. I can tell you that it is a *ton* of work. That these busy faculty members have recorded and distributed 378 episodes is nothing short of astonishing.

When I look at this project, I see a team that is *all in* for the mission of God. No one would fault these professors for focusing more narrowly on current students, or on their own research and writing. But Rolf Jacobson, David Lose, Karoline Lewis, and Matt Skinner have made a decision about God's call for them, and they reaffirm it every week when they press record. They give their time and talent to produce a free resource for preachers all over the world, one for which they receive no royalties and, I fear, precious little esteem from their colleagues in the academy.

As I reflected on my own stewardship this week—and made use of Working Preacher to prepare this sermon—I realized I needed to be *all in* too. I decided not to live with a divided consciousness, benefiting from this remarkable resource but ignoring its need for my support. Maybe some of you have had the same experience during a public radio fund drive.

So I finally made a gift. It's not going to pay anyone's salary, but it was a good deal larger than the token donations I routinely make—donations that, if I'm honest, I know are intended principally to get phone volunteers or the tickling of my conscience to leave me the heck alone.

With a click and a monthly credit card deduction, the Spirit's prompting helped me bring my actions into slightly better alignment with my values. I took a baby step toward singleness of heart. And, not surprisingly, I found the gift of gladness there as well. Working Preacher became, for me, in that moment, a sort of anti-horcrux, an earthly well of grace, and opportunity to nourish my soul on the inspiration of God's Living Word, and to help share that richness with others.

So there's a little part of my story. But let's bring it back to St. Paul's. In the weeks ahead, I hope that *our* prayerful discernment, our frank and perhaps uncomfortable conversations, and at last our decisive action will be marked by a profound desire to live united. What delights and inspires us about this community? What challenges us and helps us grow? We all have amazing answers to those questions.

So whatever the *quantity* of time, talent, and treasure we contribute to these efforts, let's let the *quality* of our support be whole-hearted.

Let us pray.

Gracious Lord, grant to each of us that precious gift of your Spirit: singleness of heart. Help us find peace, meaning, and gladness in the fullness of our support for your mission among us. And help us offer to you what is yours: the fullness of our lives. *Amen.*