

Generosity as Stewardship

1Peter 4:7-11

Matthew 25:14-30

November 8, 2009

The word *stewardship* is badly in need of rehabilitation. Today when you hear “stewardship,” your eyes probably glaze over, and your hand automatically reaches to protect your wallet. Attached to the word *campaign*, stewardship is seen as just another way to ask for money. Solely identified with fundraising, “stewardship campaign,” is understood as a euphemistic way to talk about pledging to the church’s budget. Unfortunately, “stewardship,” has become little more than a buzzword that signals a relationship with God available only through the giving of money. It has come to be associated with guilt and fear, guilt about how much to give and fear about being manipulated to give beyond one’s means.

Now, I don’t want to lie to you, or be evasive or euphemistic. Our church council members are going to meet after church today to approve a budget for next year that’s around \$100,000, a lot of money for a church this size, but that’s what we think is necessary to meet our growing needs and to reach out more effectively and widely into our community and world. So, I definitely want you to pledge to the church’s budget. If we don’t pledge and if we don’t support the church financially, well – bye, bye church. The spiritual and the material lie often uneasily together; we’d much rather think spiritually than think materially within the confines of these walls, but the truth is, it takes money to keep the church doors open.

But stewardship is so much more than pledging to the church’s budget, although that can certainly be part of it. Stewardship, rightly understood, is about a way of life, a way of understanding about who we are, why we are, and what is our responsibility in God’s creation. A standard definition of stewardship is “the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one’s care.”¹ It is managing resources that belong to someone else for the benefit of others. I still can remember how proud and honored my mother was when she was elected at a charge conference, like the one we will have on Wednesday, to be a member of the Board of Stewards at our church. That’s what the Methodist Church used to call the church council before “stewardship” became a dirty word. Like those of you who have accepted positions of leadership, she was to be a steward, charged with the responsibility of caring for the life of the church so that it could benefit others. And she was both excited and humbled by that opportunity to serve.

So being a steward, living a life of stewardship, is a responsible and powerful position. Good stewardship can be life-changing, while poor stewardship can lead to disaster. (The name “Bernie Madoff” comes to mind!) Stewardship requires us to use our time, our talent, and our resources carefully, wisely, intentionally, understanding that it is God who owns everything, and has entrusted us with its management. From the beginning of the Bible when God appoints humankind to have dominion over the earth to manage it wisely, to the epistle reading read earlier, “Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received,” the people of God have considered themselves to be stewards of riches and resources not of their own making and not of their own possession.

Faith tells us that we have been given an incredible abundance for which we offer thanks every day – family, friends, health, the natural world, a God who loves and cares for us, who knows the number of hairs on our head, and who is aware of our every thought and movement. That’s why we’re keeping gratitude journals this month, to become more aware of the abundance in our lives.

But, culture tells us that we don’t have enough, that it is a dog-eat-dog kind of world, where there will never be enough to go around – not enough food, not enough money, not

enough love – so we’d better grab as much as we can and hang tightly on to it. In some of the current arguments about health care reform, that is what we’re hearing – fear, fear that by giving to someone else, something will be taken away from me. The poet and writer Wendell Berry has noted that because of this way of thinking, because of focusing on scarcity rather than on abundance, and living out of fear, we have a “fundamentally ungenerous way of life.”²

In the parable from Matthew that we heard earlier, this is the crux of the problem. The master, whom we can understand to be God, has given to his servants abundantly and asked them to be good stewards, to make the most of what they’ve been given. Two of the servants go out and do exactly that, investing wisely, shepherding what they’ve been given, and doubling what they were entrusted with.

But the third servant is afraid, afraid he’ll lose the amount he’s been given and be punished for it, so he buries it in the ground, where it remains an undeveloped and unused resource, thinking he’s keeping it safe until the master’s return. The first two servants act out of faith understanding their master to be gracious and generous; the third acts out of fear, afraid of losing what he has, afraid the master is hard-hearted and harsh. And his fear of making a mistake, of coming up short, and of being punished, freezes him into inaction.

Many of us may have experienced that fear. At some point in life, we can all have our moments when we don’t feel the love and grace of God, when our hearts are not touched by gratitude for what God has done, when we forget the source of our blessings and think it’s all up to us, and when that happens, we become hoarders, burying in the dirt, or stuffing in our mattresses, saving up for that rainy day the little bit we have because we’re afraid of scarcity, afraid of loss.

When we live out of fear instead of gratitude, that’s what happens. We cut ourselves off from the God who loves and provides for us. The master, on his return, is angry with this third servant, because his behavior has indicated a basic lack of trust in the master and fundamental misunderstanding of the master’s character. Because he was afraid and not grateful, the servant could not serve gladly and invest wisely; he became isolated, suspicious, hesitant and defensive, more interested in playing it safe than in doing good. Afraid of the future, he saw the original gift from the master as an end in itself, rather than a means to bring about even greater abundance.

The key to being good stewards, then, is gratitude, thankfulness for the gifts that have already been given and for the opportunity of making the most of them not just for ourselves but for others. Gratitude naturally, inevitably leads to generosity of time, of talent, of means. As you think about the gifts or talents you’ve been given – those things you’re good at – doesn’t your gratitude for those gifts lead you to want to share them with others? Those of you who cook and serve at Our Daily Bread, as you will do tomorrow, you are taking your gift of hospitality and sharing it with hungry people. Some of you have worked on Habitat houses and other re-hab projects around town, sharing your talents with hammer and nails, for the benefit of others. Some of you have listening ears, and share that gift by patiently sitting with and listening to the joys and the concerns of someone else. I am so thankful for our choir members who share their gift for singing with us every Sunday. God has given each of us a gift in abundance, some perhaps more than one gift, for the purpose of sharing it with someone else.

Giving of time and talent and treasure is counter-cultural. It is the complete opposite of our world that tells us to consume, to buy, to hoard, and to never be satisfied until we have more. The billionaire, J. Paul Getty was once asked how much money he really needed, and his answer, pitifully, was “Just a little bit more.” Sometimes we can overcome this pull of culture, and toss a dollar or two into a Salvation Army bucket at Christmas time or into the offering plate when it’s passed at church, or we may or give an hour or two for an occasional event. But these isolated instances of giving, as good and necessary as they are, are different from creating an entire life built on the generosity arising from gratitude for all of God’s blessings, where we are intentional

about what we do and how we use our energy, time, money, and possessions, where we plan ahead, not acting spur of the moment, giving from our abundance, not from what is left over.

Last week we came to the altar with gifts of food; this week, we come with shoes! I am embarrassed to tell you how many pairs of shoes I discovered I have! I believe I might qualify to be the Imelda Marcos of Athens-Clarke County! I am giving away today 16 pairs of shoes. That's in addition to the 22 pairs I gave away a couple of years ago, and the 39 pairs that still reside in my closet. Isn't that awful?? What is it about shoes? I must have an obsession with them. And it was difficult to part with some of them; I kept thinking about maybe I'd need them one day – the old athletic shoes, maybe they'd be good for a rainy day (like I'm going out to exercise on a rainy day – who am I kidding?). Or the dress shoes – granted they slip off my foot, and don't feel very good, but they're pretty. I was convicted by a statement I read this week as I prepared for this sermon, "Complete possession is proved only by giving. All you are unable to give possesses you."³ If I've added correctly, that's 79 pairs of shoes that have lived in my closet, most of them unused, quietly and insidiously possessing me while there are people in our community and around the world who don't have shoes.

Maybe some of you have heard of Father Divine. He was a famous black preacher in Harlem in the 1930s. In his church, the offering, the act of giving, became high drama. He would urge his congregation to make their faith real by the reality of their gifts. His word for this action was "tangibilitation." "You've got to learn how to tangibilitate," he'd thunder from his pulpit. And the people would bring their tangible gifts and lay them at the altar.⁴ That's what I'm hoping for us this month – that we will tangibilitate – whether it's cans of food, or pairs of shoes – next week, coats, or bus cards, or tuition grants – whether it's our tithes and our offerings – make our faith real by the reality of our gifts. Only when we can freely give it away, is it truly ours; and only when we can freely give it away do we acknowledge the one from whom all blessings flow, the One who has called us to a lifetime of stewardship and generosity. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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¹ Lauren Tyler Wright, *Giving: The a Sacred Art* (Woodstock, Vt.: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2008), 21.

² p. 48.

³ p. 91.

⁴ Peter Gomes, *The Good Book* (New York: Avon Books, 1996), p. 287.