

Stewardship Homily
October 17, 2021
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May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, Lord - our rock, and our redeemer.

When Emily asked if I could preach the lay stewardship homily, I thought back to two years ago, pre-pandemic, when we were having thoughts about ginning up a capital campaign. I had felt more positive about that than I would normally have in the past. I felt my first ever stirrings of maybe reaching deep to achieve a significant giving goal, a stretching sort of giving. Remembering that positive inclination: I said, "Well, okay," thinking I could stretch a little and come up with something to say.

Bear in mind that I have never been especially enthusiastic about stewardship campaigns, being generally content to let other folks do the stepping up. So when I said yes, I knew I would be preaching to myself as much as addressing you all.

Then when faced with the task, I thought, "What have I gotten myself into?!?"

Well, I had to start somewhere, and my standard fall-back to get into an idea is to start with the word itself:

One Dictionary (1) says, "Stewardship is the management of domestic concerns on a large estate; or direction of affairs of an organization; and a steward on a ship provides and distributes the food" Another (2) says, "Stewardship is the job of supervising or taking care of something, such as an organization or property. For example 'responsible stewardship of our public lands'"

Wikipedia says, Stewardship is an **ethic** that embodies the responsible planning and management of resources, for: the environment and nature, economics, health, property, information, theology, cultural resources, etc.

"Stewardship" originally referred to the tasks of a domestic steward, from "stig," (for *house, hall*) and "weard," (for *ward, guard, guardian, keeper*). Originally "bringing food and drink to the castle's dining hall," it expanded to include the domestic, service and management needs of the entire household.

In theology, Stewardship is a belief that humans are responsible for the world, and should take care of and look after it.

Genesis 2:15, "*And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the Garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.*"

Stewardship refers to the responsibility that Christians have in maintaining and using wisely the gifts that God has bestowed. God wishes human beings to be his collaborators in the work of creation, redemption and sanctification.

The Episcopal Church website page "What We Do - Stewardship" states that Stewardship is about being grateful, responsible stewards of the gifts we receive from God. The tradition of giving back to God and to the church comes from the Biblical practice of "tithing," which means to give back a tenth of our earnings to God (Numbers 18:26.) The Episcopal Church sees stewardship as more than simply contributing money to the church; it's also about contributing time and talents and

volunteering for ministry and mission. It's about reaching out to build relationships from a perspective of abundance instead of scarcity.

Think about that: "Having a viewpoint of abundance rather than a viewpoint of scarcity."

Back to Wikipedia: Frequent references to the "tithe," or giving of a portion, are found throughout the Bible as part of the Jewish law. The tithe represents the returning to God of a significant, specific, and intentional portion of material gain; under the Jewish law, the first ten percent of one's food product (produce or animal livestock) was to be sacrificed at the temple for the sustenance of the Levites. And Numbers 18:26 tells the Levites that *they* are to tithe to the Lord from that tithe to them. However, giving is not limited to the tithe or a specific amount, which is illustrated by Jesus' comment that a woman who gave a very small amount had given more than those who had given large amounts because "*while they gave out of their abundance, she gave all she had to live on.*"(3) Jesus in another discourse with a rich young man concedes that the *ideal* of giving up all of one's possessions is impractical: "With man this is impossible," he said (4), comparing it to a camel passing through the eye of a needle.

As Laura pointed out last week: Impossible for us, not for God. "Was the rich man so focused on his riches that he didn't feel the love of God? Was his horizon limited by his riches," she asked? Was his perspective one of abundance? or of scarcity.

Was the widow operating from a perspective of *abundance* rather than scarcity? Was she thinking, "I have something I can give the Lord, I am rich?"

As Laura mentioned in her homily, Jesus didn't have a "base of operations." But we do, and we need to maintain it. It provides us the where-with-all to effect our ministry.

I was driving by Trinity Oxford recently, and contemplated the stewardship responsibility *that* congregation has to care for their 400 year old church and grounds. *Our* historical burden is not as weighty as Trinity Oxford's, but all us congregations have a responsibility to preserve and enhance the heritage our church community predecessors bequeathed to us, the physical plant, and the practices and traditions.

Admittedly, the church is not "the building," the church is the people.

But the building, and grounds, will be taken by folks who drive by as an outward visible sign of our inward spiritual grace, and we want it to look good.

I found the website of The Episcopal Network of Stewardship (5). They say those of us in the business of fomenting stewardship are encouraging people to make a "statement of hope" for the church - for the *institution*, and for the *members*. We are trying to help people to "Live Generously." That is about *more* than making gifts to fund ministry. To live generously is to view the world not as being a series of transactions – not just getting pieces of pie, or putting coins in a jar (although that *can* be a valuable thing to do, right Mary?) – but rather, to view the world as a pattern of *opportunities* and *impacts*. When we look about us and see possibility, we understand that our work in the reign of God has consequence, impact, results. Living Generously *defies* the fear of scarcity and defies *fear-driven* decision-making.

You might say living generously is living gracefully.

The rich man walking away from Jesus was dejected, not graceful. Do we see the widow as maybe being graceful? Jesus certainly presents her in a positive light.

Living generously, and living *gratefully*. Last month Emily introduced us to the poem "Help Me Unbury Wonder," and a couple weeks ago introduced us to Ross Gay's "Book of Delights," exhorting us to be open to bits of delight and wonder in our daily life. It may be hard to feel grateful

for blessings which we take for granted. But the little blessings can open us to awareness of all our blessings.

More to be grateful for: we are re-gathering. We are reemerging. We are discerning anew our ministry together and to each other.

Sustaining and invigorating our church community and our ministry is a daunting endeavor. Vestry looks at our finances every month, and we wonder, and hope, that we can sustain it. It is daunting. But it is a *group* endeavor. We all contribute. Our combined effort makes it happen.

Frances Perkins was a woman who had witnessed the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911. She was FDR's Secretary of Labor, who pushed with him and worked with him to institute the 40 hour work week, health, unemployment, & old-age insurances, minimum wage, and abolish child labor. She once said, "There is always a large horizon. . . There is much to be done. It is up to you to contribute some small part to a program of human betterment for all time." (6)

There is a verse on the Hopkins Gate at Williams College about putting our focus on an unattainable goal while striving to reach as far as we CAN reach.

Mark Hopkins (7) wrote:

Climb High

Climb Far

Your Goal the Sky

Your Aim the Star

Amen

(1) The New Merriam-Webster Dictionary 1989

(2) Generic on-line

(3) Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4

(4) Matthew 19:26

(5) www.tens.org

(6) Heather Cox Richardson blog Sunday September 5, 2021 regarding Labor Day

(7) Mark Hopkins, beloved educator, president of Williams College 1836-1872