

Taking Care of Business

Stewardship 2

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Psalm 127

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Good to Grow --- that's the name of our Stewardship Campaign that is now underway. "Stewardship" is not a word we use very much today. We used to have stewardesses on planes but now we have flight attendants. In a super-fancy restaurant there might be a wine steward—though I don't think I've ever eaten at that high-end an establishment.

But originally a steward was someone who takes care of the master's business. A steward takes care of running an estate or a household for a master. The property does not belong to the steward, but the steward is responsible for the care of the property and for helping the property or the investment to prosper and grow.

There must be people out there in our modern world who have that kind of a role, but it's not really a term we are very familiar with anymore. However, stewardship is a very fitting image in understanding our relationship with God. In 1 Corinthians 4: 1, the apostle Paul says:

"This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God."

I heard one minister say that "Stewardship is everything we do after we say 'I believe'".

We are stewards or caretakers of all the gifts that God has given to us. We are stewards of the earth. The first chapter of Genesis makes that clear. The truth is we haven't been very good stewards of the earth. We do well to remember that God has given us the land, the waters, the air and the creatures that live as gifts to use but also to tend and care for. Caring for the earth or being an environmentalist should not be about political preference but rather a strong sense of calling as a natural outcome of our relationship with the Creator.

Mother's Day is a good time to remember that we are stewards of our children. In the end, our children do not belong to us. They are ours for a period of time to love, care for, nurture and raise, but they belong to God. As I said when I baptized sweet little Lauren, she was born for a purpose. Every child is. You may have played a rather active role in the creation process, but you are not their Creator.

We are also stewards of the mission of this church. We are stewards of the calling that God has given to us as a group. This group that hangs out together with a unique calling to bring the transforming love of Jesus to ordinary and hurting people is called the church.

Sometimes our calling to care for the earth, our children, our church—or whatever else you are called by God to be a steward of—feels heavy. Sometimes it feels *very* heavy. Here's the thing. When we slip from thinking of ourselves as a steward into a false believe that we are the owner, the weight can become overwhelming, and often we end up doing a bad job of caring for whatever it is we are called to care for. When we feel like we own the earth, we are tempted to abuse it and pollute it. When we feel like we own the church, the burden becomes too heavy and we are tempted to give up. (I'm not talking about the building, but this group of people that God has called together with a particular mission to reach out with the transforming love of Jesus to all people). There's too much to do. There is too much need. I frequently come close to despair as I look at my week and realize there is just not enough time to visit or call or counsel all the people who need us as a church, or when we look at our budget and we're not sure if the money we have can meet all the needs we see.

When we believe that our children belong to us alone, we are also tempted to either abuse the power or pressure them into filling what really is our dream that we were unable or too afraid to accomplish. Often we feel the guilt that we are not parenting as perfectly as we should.

That's what I love about the Psalm we read this morning.

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep.

In one of my Bible references it suggested that that last line could be interpreted to mean he gives or provides for his beloved while they sleep.

How many of you spend your days eating the bread of anxious toil, carrying burdens that just seem too heavy? I shared with you a while back that the Lord taught me when it comes to my calling—particularly with my sermon writing which could often be described as "anxious toil"—that I need to

1) Work Hard ...2) Leave room for God and... 3) Enjoy the process.

If you do that with all that God has given you to care for, you will be healthier, have more peace and more joy, and that which you care for will have a better chance of growing and thriving.

That is true of your work. Lucy Stein shared this story with me and said I could share it. Lucy owns the A&W at the 1000 Islands Mall and last week the power was out for a good chunk of time there. Lucy of course had a lot of meat in freezers and she was faced with losing a lot of money. She said the fear was just building, but then she told me "I put my head on the counter and said

“Lord, I don’t know what to do, please help me”. As she prayed that prayer, a picture of a man who is a friend and who owns a grocery store popped into her head. She took it as an answer to prayer and called him up. He said, “No problem. Bring the food over -- I’ve got space in my freezers.”

It is especially true of this church. We are not to despair or be afraid. It is not our church. It belongs to Jesus. Those of us in leadership, those of us who have stood up and taken vows to be members of this church are called to work hard, but Jesus said “I will build my church”. In the last few months Pastor Doug, who retired at the end of April, said to me countless times “I don’t believe God has taken us this far to dump us. God has a plan for this church and it’s a good one. We just need to follow him.”

And, as rough a shape as our environment seems to be in, I believe that if we begin to see ourselves as stewards of God’s creation that there is hope for our world. If we are willing to work hard with humility and ask for the Creator’s help and guidance—making the changes that God calls us to make in order to bring healing to this earth—then I believe that new life and new solutions to big problems will come.

When we place that which we care for in the Creator’s hand, the burden is lighter and the outcome is brighter. The poet Kahlil Gibran wrote a beautiful poem entitled “*On Children*” which speaks to this perfectly. It speaks to our responsibility for our children but also for all that God has given to us to nurture and care for.

*Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.
You may give them your love but not your thoughts,
For they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,
which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.
You may strive to be like them,
but seek not to make them like you.
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.
You are the bows from which your children
as living arrows are sent forth.
The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite,
and He bends you with His might
that His arrows may go swift and far.
Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;
For even as He loves the arrow that flies,
so He loves also the bow that is stable.*

God does give us things to care for, but we are not called to spend our life worrying or eating the bread of anxious toil. If that’s the kind of bread you’ve been eating (and I certainly have days and weeks where I “rise up early and go late to rest eating the bread of anxious toil”!) then I encourage you to pray the Lord’s Prayer and to start eating the daily bread that God provides.

Jesus said, “I am the bread of Life.” That’s the bread we are called to eat. So take up the call to be hard working, dedicated Stewards of God. And, always remember that ultimately you are not the owners, but the servants of a God who loves us more than a mother loves her child. There is nothing better than serving a God who knows you and loves you. He knows your weaknesses and your limitations and he knows your gifts and all that you can accomplish when you are willing to pray the prayer that Archbishop Oscar Romero, faced with overwhelming injustice in El Salvador, prayed one life-changing day on his knees:

I can't. You must. Show me the way.

When you surrender your will and your sense of entitlement and ownership, and when you are truly ready to follow and to change, amazing healing and growth and goodness will take root in your life, in your family and in the world. But friends, this is not our duty. There’s nothing worse than a grumpy, judgemental, should-y Christian. You were created for joy! We were created to truly *enjoy* all the responsibilities we have been given: the caring for our earth, our children, our church, our work, our community; knowing that we are not alone. What a wonderful opportunity we have to be part of God’s awesome and transforming adventure!

Thanks be to God! Amen