

Six Spiritual Truths of Stewardship
Year-Around Stewardship Sermon # 1 **January 10, 2010**
Rev. Craig M. Sturm **Trinity Lutheran Church**

Today is the festival where we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord. Understandably, I usually preach on Holy Baptism, but today I have prepared a sermon on stewardship. Yes, stewardship.

All too often we associate stewardship with the budget, with asking for money to pay the bills. We think that way because usually the only time we talk about stewardship is in November, when the upcoming budget is on everyone's mind. Unfortunately, this gives us a skewed picture of what the Bible teaches about stewardship. Stewardship is about faith, not about money. It is about our relationship with God, not about how much money we need to make the budget.

To help us get out of our stewardship = budget rut, here at Trinity we have implemented a year-around stewardship program. We're going to talk about stewardship all year long, in many and various ways. Perhaps you've noticed each week in the bulletin there are stewardship insights to contemplate. If you receive my e-mail e-pistle each Thursday, more thoughts about stewardship appear there.

The Church Council has even chosen 12 agencies – one each month – that our congregation will support to help us put into practice what we have learned about being faithful stewards of all God has entrusted to us. I look forward to making this year-long stewardship journey with you. You can read more about it in the January newsletter.

I am happy to report that our congregation gave well over \$190,000 to the ministry and mission of this church during 2009 – well over last year's budget. And I am also pleased to report that estimated pledges for 2010 will allow us to do well more than our 2010 budget will require. In this time of economic uncertainty, our congregation is financially stable. Thanks be to God!

There is no need for me to beg for money; there was no letter sent out this year requesting members to consider raising their pledges to meet budget expenses. We can forget about finances this morning. I want us to just clear our minds so that we can hear the truth that God will speak to us this morning from the Holy Scriptures.

I want to offer six basic spiritual truths that the Bible teaches about stewardship. If you want to follow along, the six essential principals are listed in the bulletin under my sermon title.

The first truth is this: God owns everything. Americans pride themselves on ownership. We want to own houses, cars, investment portfolios. We speak often of everything that is "mine." But the truth of Scripture is that we actually own nothing. Psalm 24 declares, "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it." God owns everything.

I'll never forget moving into the freshman dorm rooms at Texas Lutheran my first year of college. As you might expect, the rooms were quite drab – four cinder block walls painted the dulllest beige color you have ever seen. There were also a couple pieces of cheap furniture that

had been terrorized by last year's stressed-out residents. It was a textbook definition of unremarkable.

A classmate down the hall knew that he could do a better job with the decorating, so he took it upon himself to renovate his room, complete with new paint, built-in shelving, and an incredible custom-built bunk bed/study desk combination. His room was the envy of the freshman class.

There was only one small problem. That renovation guru had forgotten something. He didn't own the space. The dorm room was the property of the college; he was merely a tenant of the space for a year.

No matter how drab the room was, that freshman had no authority to do with the room as he pleased. Owners have rights; tenants have responsibilities.

It's exactly the same with our relationship with God. The fact that God created everything means that God is the rightful owner. We are only tenants of God's glorious creation. Out of love, God has entrusted the blessings of his creation into our hands. But that doesn't give us the authority to do with it as we please. We have a responsibility to God to faithfully manage the resources God has entrusted to us. Real joy comes when we acknowledge God as the rightful owner of all things, and then make wise decisions in managing the riches of God.

If we truly understand this spiritual truth, then everything changes. Instead of asking, "How much time should I give?" or "How much money should I donate?" (which are both questions based on *ownership*), we begin to ask such questions as, "How much money do I really need to keep?" or "How could I better manage my time so that I could love and serve more people?" Those types of questions both acknowledge that God is the rightful owner of all things, and they honor God by using our time, talents, and treasures for his glory, rather than only for our own benefit.

The second spiritual truth is this: God's work must be supported by God's people. It was God's plan all along for believers to support the work of God. God blesses us with riches and blessings in order that the church would be equipped to spread the story of Jesus Christ. In other words, if this church is going to thrive and grow, then we have to make it happen. We are God's game plan to share the good news of Jesus Christ with the whole world.

If a ministry needs to be funded, then it is up to us to fund it. If an opportunity arises, it will only be taken care of if someone steps forward and offers their time and talent. God has blessed us in order that the church would be blessed. By offering his very own Son to the world, God, the perfect Giver, models for us how we are to offer our lives. Christian giving is not just an activity that is meant to be done when a need arises; Christian giving is a lifestyle. We are called to live each day, each moment, with a gracious, generous heart, willing to reach out and offer our lives to all people.

The third truth might make us squirm a bit: God holds every person accountable. God has clearly revealed in his holy Word that we are to give our lives as fully and generously as God has

first given to us. On Judgment Day, we will stand before God, the righteous Judge, and give account for how we have lived and how we have managed the gifts placed in our care.

Jesus' familiar parable of the talents declares this truth. A manager entrusts each person with some resources and then asks each one to put them to good use. Those who invest what they have been given are rewarded. Those who do not invest are judged. Why? Because their heart is not in the right place. They have taken for granted the riches God has given to them. They have not seized the opportunity that God has given them to bring others to Christ.

So if God has blessed you with a beautiful voice, you should be using your voice to sing God's praise. If God has blessed you with retirement, you should be using the extra time to love and serve others in need. If God has blessed you with the gift of faith, you should be telling others on a regular basis about the difference Christ has made in your life. Whatever gift you have been blessed with, ask yourself, "How am I using this God-given gift to bring glory to God?" That way, when you stand face to face with the Lord, you can honestly say that you faithfully managed the blessings God placed in your care.

The fourth spiritual truth is this: God's will is that we give wisely and generously. God calls us to use wisely all that he has given us. I invite you to do a time inventory of how you spend each day. God graced you with 168 hours this past week. How did you choose to use those hours? How many of those hours were set aside to draw your heart closer to God and to serve your neighbor? After all, Jesus says those are the two most important things in life: to love God, and to serve our neighbor. If those two things aren't at the top of our To-Do list, what does that say about our priorities? Also, do an inventory of how you use all of the financial resources God has entrusted to you. Take an honest look at your bank statement and see what it reveals.

God wants us to be very discerning when it comes to his money. Some organizations – although they do great work – use only a small portion of donations they receive to help those in need. The rest is used to cover high advertising costs and out-of-control salaries. Know where the money will go before you give.

It's a good feeling to know that the world-wide ministries of the ELCA like Lutheran World Relief and the ELCA World Hunger Fund are some of the best rated organizations in the world at using donations wisely. For every dollar given, only 9 cents is used for administrative costs. Better yet, 100% of every dollar designated for specific disasters (such as a hurricane or tsunami) is used to aiding people in need. Every dollar given goes to those in need. Compare that figure to any other relief agency, and I guarantee you that one of the best ways to invest God's money is within the ministries of the Lutheran church.

Because this is God's money we are talking about, God wants us to do our homework to see where the money is actually going. And once we have discerned that it is in line with God's purposes, then God calls us to give generously, again, modeling our giving after the manner in which God first gave to us – with joy and thanksgiving.

Which leads to the fifth truth: God holds more responsible those to whom more is given. Or to use the words of Jesus found in Luke 12:48: "When someone has been given much, much will

be required in return.” When we consider the abundance of our blessings, surely the Bible is referring to people like us, people who have so much. So, the Bible says, God will require much of us. We are called to give sacrificially, meaning that we must *give up* something, not just *give away* something. When Jesus gave up his life on the cross for us, he was giving sacrificially.

True sacrifice always results in personal cost to the giver. When we give to God sacrificially, we should feel it. In order to give in the same manner that God first gave to us, we have to actually *give up* something. I know of a family who gave up exchanging Christmas gifts this year so that they could use that money to help another family who was struggling to pay their basic utility bills. That family didn’t just *give away* something; they *gave up* something. They sacrificed something in their own life in order to bless someone else. That is what sacrificial giving is all about.

A wealthy person who gives a substantial gift may not be giving sacrificially, while the poorest person who offers a far smaller gift may be giving in a radically sacrificial way. Jesus taught this lesson when he brought to our attention the widow giving just a few coins in the Temple. “All the others,” Jesus said, “gave out of their abundance. But the widow gave all she had, entrusting her life into the hands of God, believing that God would provide for her, just as God had done every other day of her life.” That is the kind of radical giving God asks of us, his people.

The sixth and final spiritual truth is this: God blesses the giver in proportionate measure. Let’s be clear: God doesn’t need anything from us; everything in this world belongs to God. And yet God knows that when we give generously of ourselves to the work of God’s kingdom, then we ultimately experience God’s grace, and we grow in faith. Jesus says in Luke 6:38, “Give, and you will receive. The amount that you give will determine the amount you get back.” The more generously we give to God, the Bible promises the more generously we will receive. It is impossible to out give God. The more we are willing to use what God has entrusted to us for God’s purposes, the more God will entrust to us. That’s just the way God works.

Let us never forget: we have been given a great privilege responsibility. God has richly blessed us with time, talents, and treasures. Our calling is to make the most of each investment God has placed within our “portfolio.” Every day is a new opportunity to invest in God’s kingdom. Our goal should be that with every decision made, every word spoken, every hour spent, every dollar given – our goal should be to honor our heavenly Father, the Lord of all creation.

God is looking for trustworthy stewards, believers whose greatest desire is to use their gifts and talents to make Christ known. Will God find those credentials in us? God needs us to be people he can count on, people who are committed to the cause, no matter what the cost.

In order for God to consider us trustworthy stewards, we must see everything in life as sacred. Everything we have and everything we are must be devoted to the Lord. Whatever our time, whatever our talents, whatever our treasures, let us dedicate them to God’s purposes. St. Paul says, “Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Let it be so in your life and in mine. Amen.