

## **“Faithful Stewards”**

**Rev. Craig M. Sturm      Trinity Lutheran Church, Sherman Texas**

**November 22, 2009      Commitment Sunday**

**Based on Matthew 25:14-30**

Once there was a man who was very stingy with his money. Before he died, he made his wife promise that she would have him buried with the \$20,000 he had saved. She reluctantly agreed. Eventually the man died, and at the funeral – just before they closed the casket – she slipped in this envelope.

Her friend stood there in disbelief. She said, “Surely you didn’t just put the money in there.” “Of course I did,” the man’s wife said. “I’m a Christian. I promised I would do it, and so I did.” Her friend said, “You mean to tell me that you just buried \$20,000.” The wife said, “I sure did. I wrote a check!”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The last couple of weeks we have been focusing on Christian stewardship. By revisiting the opening chapters of Genesis, we were reminded that God created everything. And since God created everything, everything belongs to God. We own nothing.

The Old Testament reading today from 1 Chronicles proclaims this truth. David says, “Everything in the heavens and on earth is yours, O Lord, and this is your kingdom. Wealth and honor come from you alone, for you rule over everything.” David continues by asking a revealing question, “Who am I, and who are my people, that we could give anything to you? Everything we have has come from your gracious hand, and we give you only what you first gave us!”

Even though everything in this world belongs to God, out of love, God has entrusted to us a portion of the many riches of his creation. God simply asks that we use what he has given us with him in mind. With every decision we make, we should be asking ourselves, “Since everything I have belongs to God, how would God want me to use this?”

That’s the message of the gospel today. Jesus tells a story about a man who is leaving for a while and he entrusts everything he has to his servant’s care. Can you imagine the trust and the confidence the owner has in his servants to be able to entrust everything he owns-- everything – to his servant’s care?

And the owner’s only instructions to them is this: “Manage what I have given you with me in mind. I have shared with you my hopes and my desires for the world. So

use what I have given you to make my hopes and dreams become a reality. Give it your best shot.”

There are a couple of things to note about the parable Jesus tells us today. First, God, the Creator of all, is amazingly generous. In the parable, God gathers his servants around him and blesses each of them with vast sums of money. In the original Greek, the bags of silver that are mentioned are worth about 15 years of wages. During biblical times, people lived day to day. To have accumulated just 1 year’s worth of wages would have made you part of the wealthiest people of the land. So the amount of money Jesus describes is staggering! The fact that God entrusts his entire creation into our care is simply mind-blowing.

And did you notice that everyone was given something? God blesses everyone. We get so caught up in why it isn’t fair that some received so much more than others, that we miss the important point that each and every person received something.

So it is with us. God has blessed each of us with something. God has entrusted into each of our hands money, time, and abilities to invest in his kingdom. All of us are blessed. All of us are accountable as to how we choose to use what God has given to us.

The second thing to note about the parable is this: It is quite clear that the giver of the gifts (God), although he leaves for a very long time, is coming back. And when God returns, he will settle his accounts. God will ask us for an accounting of how we chose to use what he entrusted to us. In the parable, the first two servants fully invest themselves in the ways of God. God is thrilled and greatly rewards them. God entrusts them with even more blessings to use for the sake of his kingdom.

It’s a different story for the third servant. Instead of investing himself in God’s kingdom, he simply hoards it, and Jesus calls him “wicked” and “lazy” – buzz words for choosing self over God, comfort over obedience. Let us not deceive ourselves: How we choose to live our lives and how we choose to use the blessings God has given to us matters. God takes note. When Jesus returns, we will have to account for our lives.

What a minute, you might be thinking. That sounds dangerously close to works righteousness, of having to DO something in order for God to love us. What about grace?

Believe it or not, Jesus speaks these harsh words to us in love. Jesus doesn’t want us to reach the end of our life and feel the profound regret of missing out on what really mattered. In love, as an act of grace, Jesus teaches us to recognize the incredible generosity of God our Father and to invest in God’s kingdom NOW so that we might not miss out on another day of experiencing the rich blessings of God’s kingdom.

Someone once said that faithful stewardship is essentially three things: it is an act of worship, it is an expression of our faith, and it is a discipline for spiritual growth.

First, stewardship is an act of worship. We take something we highly value (like money and time) and willingly give it up as a sign of our allegiance to God. Right before his death, Jesus praised a woman for pouring out a bottle of costly perfume to anoint him for burial. She gave up something she valued as an act of love for Jesus.

Jesus calls us to do the same – to give up a portion of our time, talents, and treasure as a sign of our commitment and devotion to God. When we worship, we confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord. We live out that confession in our daily lives when we take a portion of what we value, of what we often put our trust in – like money – and give it away. In doing so, we proclaim that God and God alone is the most important thing in our life.

Second, stewardship is an expression of our faith, of acting out what we believe. When we willingly and joyfully offer back to God generous offerings, we demonstrate that we really do believe that all things come from God and that God will provide for our every need. To give to God more than our comfort level allows is to take God at his Word. It is to live by faith and not by sight. It is to boldly proclaim, as the opening hymn put it, “Here I am, Lord. I have heard you calling. I will go, Lord, if you lead me.” Trust me, that’s scary stuff. But by never taking that leap of faith and offering our lives so fully means that we will never taste the full delicacies of God’s kingdom.

Lastly, sharing our financial resources is a spiritual discipline in that frees us from the tempting materialistic tendencies of our culture which draw our hearts away from God and from all the things that matter most. We know all too well how money can be deceitful. “You cannot serve both God and money,” the Bible says. Money will try to control us. Trusting God’s Word that life is more than obtaining possessions, we choose to give away a generous portion of our money to ensure that our hearts are in the right place, to ensure that our values and commitments are God-centered.

Most Christians struggle with giving the 10% tithe that God’s Word commands us to give. In fact, most Lutherans only give between 1 and 2 percent of their income to the work of the church. That’s not a financial crisis. That’s a spiritual crisis. It is a lack of trust and faith in the God who has claimed us as his own children in the waters of baptism. It reveals our sinfulness, of taking matters into our hands just in case God doesn’t come through.

A pastor was once walking along the beach and he finds a bottle that has washed ashore. He picks up the bottle, opens it up, and out comes a genie. The genie is so grateful for his freedom that he tells the pastor that he will grant him one wish.

The pastor says, "I have always wanted to go to the Holy Land, but as I am terrified of flying and I get seasick just thinking about boats. So my wish is that you would build a road from here to the Holy Land so I can drive there!"

The genie says, "You're kidding, right? That would be impossible! Do you know how long that bridge would be? Let's be reasonable. Ask for something else."

"OK," the pastor says. "I wish that all my church members would tithe." The genie sighed and said, "Do you want that bridge to be two lanes or four lanes?"

Committing to give as the Bible teaches helps us grow closer to God. Jesus says, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be." For some reason, we tend to hear what Jesus says backwards. We think Jesus says that we will spend our money on the things we truly care about. Although that might be a true statement, that's not what Jesus says.

Listen carefully, and you will notice Jesus says it the other way around: "Where you put your treasure, that is where your heart will go." In other words, giving generously help us grow spiritually.

The point is not how we spend our money *reveals* what sort of people we *are*, but rather how we spend our money *determines* what sort of people we *become*." We become the sort of people God calls us to be simply by choosing to give generously of our time, talents, and treasures.

So what Jesus is really saying is this: Give to those things that you should care about, and the Spirit of God will awaken in you the kind of faithful, caring spirit that God desires in all of us. By giving generously, we act ourselves into a new way of thinking, into a new way of being. Giving generously changes us. It transforms us. It brings us closer to God. "Where your treasure is," Jesus says, "there your heart will be."

As we strive to be faithful Christian stewards, let us remember three simple words:

WALK  
LISTEN  
GIVE

When we think about our WALK with Jesus, I suspect that we often think in terms of how well **we** are doing. Am I walking with Jesus rather than choosing my own path? Am I listening to and living by the words Jesus is speaking to me? Am I being a faithful steward of what Jesus has given to me? Those are all very important questions. But they are only one side of the equation.

Lutherans refer to such questions as LAW. The LAW makes us painfully aware of how we do not measure up to God's expectations. Even though we know full well what Jesus asks of us, we all too often choose not to live according to his teachings. We fall short. We rebel. We put our wants and desires first, creating tension in our relationship with God.

Asking such questions as, "Am I walking faithfully with Jesus?" and "Am I being a faithful steward of what Jesus has given to me?" can make us feel guilty and ashamed. Such questions shine a HUGE spotlight on our self-centered lives.

If the gospel message truly is "Good News," then why does it sometimes make us feel so guilty? The GOOD NEWS is that our sin and rebellion are not the main focus of the Bible; the good and gracious nature of God is. God chooses to deal with our sin and brokenness by showering us with love and grace. God chooses to be merciful, to never give up on us. That's the good news of the Bible.

So when the Bible teaches us to walk with Jesus, instead of feeling guilty about how many detours we have taken, our hearts should be overflowing with gratitude knowing that we have never had to walk a single day of our life alone. To walk WITH Jesus means Jesus walks with us every step of the way. And when our burdens become too much to bear, Jesus literally picks us up and carries us in his arms. That's what it means to walk with Jesus.

Second, LISTEN. When God commands us to listen to Jesus, instead of worrying that we do not always give our full attention to God, we should celebrate the fact that Jesus is speaking to us. Jesus desires to have a relationship with us and wants to spend time with us. Jesus wants to show us the ropes, you might say, to teach us the ways that lead to the blessed life.

Jesus wants to tell us stories that reveal how much God loves us. It deeply saddens Jesus' heart when we make mistakes and get hurt, so Jesus talks to us and teaches us the way that leads us back to peace and contentment. That's the good news about listening to Jesus.

Finally, GIVE. True, most Lutherans might not give according to God's standard, but the very fact that we have anything at all to give reveals that God has been good to us and has provided for our needs. Because God dearly loves us, God just couldn't help himself and has abundantly blessed us with incredible gifts -- home and family, food and clothing, jobs and salaries -- the list goes on and on. God has generously and freely given to us, even when we didn't deserve it, even when we weren't grateful for the gifts. It's just God's way of doing business. That's the good news about giving.

Jesus walks with us. We never walk alone.

Jesus speaks words of wisdom and love and forgiveness to us.

God gives us far more than we ever imagined or deserved.

So the question for all of us on this commitment Sunday is this: “Believing these three truths of the Bible, how will we show our gratitude to God? Knowing how wonderful and faithful God have been to us, how will we choose to live our lives?”

Will we choose to model God’s generosity in our own lives by graciously offering our time, talents, and treasures for the sake of Christ’s church? Or will we dishonor God by taking it all for granted and putting ourselves before God?

Today God offers each of us the opportunity to express our gratitude and thankfulness by making a generous commitment to the mission and ministry of Trinity Lutheran Church. Today we have the opportunity to stand before God and say, “You have blessed me beyond my wildest dreams, and so I return to you a portion of the riches you have entrusted to me, so that your dreams and desires might be realized here in this place and throughout the world.”

The ministry proposal for 2010 is bold but it is obtainable. Why am I so sure? Because I believe that God has already given us everything we need to be the faithful people of God. When God calls, God equips. That’s the good news of God’s Word. I assure you, God has already blessed this congregation with more than enough riches for us to boldly claim the mission God has entrusted to us in the coming year.

The question is not, “Are we able?” The real question is, “Are we willing?” Are we willing to surrender our finances and our calendars to Christ so that the unconditional love and grace of God might be known and proclaimed at Trinity Lutheran Church?

Our course, the motivation behind such a question is trust. How willing are we to surrender our whole lives to Christ, to place our complete trust in God Almighty? Once we are willing to place our complete trust and confidence in God, then we naturally begin to generously offer all that we have without a second thought. We end up giving generously of ourselves not because God tells us to, but out of gratitude and thanksgiving for all God has done for us.

At the end of the service, each family will be given the opportunity to come forward to the altar and stand face to face with God. What will you say? What will you offer? At that moment, I pray that we will realize that our commitment card is really our thank you note to God.

Through our commitment, we are saying, “O God, knowing how richly and generously you have blessed me, I wish to say thank you and to offer back to you a portion of the riches you have entrusted to me, so that your hopes and dreams will continue to be realized here in this place, and throughout the world.”

As you stand face to face with Almighty God, what will you say? What will you offer?

May God find each of us faithfully with the riches he has entrusted to us.

Let it be so. Amen.