

Financial Stewardship Sermon

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Those of you who have been attending Episcopal services for a while might have noticed when fall rolled around and the days started getting shorter, and thought to yourselves, “oh it’s time for the stewardship drive at church again, AKA weekly talks about money and the needs of the parish...” If that describes you, I hope that you were pleasantly surprised, at the direction that stewardship discussions have taken this year. First, I should say that although I’ve been attending Epiphany services for only about a year, I am a life-long Episcopalian, so I’m relying on experiences in the other parishes I’ve been part of, and I imagine that things have been pretty similar here in the past. I hope that you noticed that this year, we have not had any sermons that described the long list of ministries and services that Epiphany provides to members and those in need; nor have we had copies of the budget posted in conspicuous locations, slid stealthily into bulletins, or sent out over email. No one, to my knowledge, has demanded donations from you as a dues-paying exercise, or guilted you into supporting the many worthy activities that take place here. And there is no list of parish pledging units up on the wall in the parish hall, for people to check their name off, and cluck their tongues and shake their heads at those who are not on the list. We have not engaged in any of that kind of activity. Why? Part of it is environment – I don’t think of Epiphany, at least, the Epiphany that I have come to know and love, as that kind of a place. But a lot of it is because we’ve taken to heart this year, and have tried to spread the word, about the true meaning of stewardship. Those of you who have attended one of the forums on stewardship (and there’s still time today after the service, so if you’ve missed it, don’t fret!), or one of the cluster groups that met over the past couple of weeks, are hopefully more aware of the meaning of stewardship now than before. We have come to associate the term “stewardship” with the term “fundraising.” But that doesn’t work. Stewards are not fundraisers – stewards are caretakers. And stewardship is not about funding the Welcome Table, or Street Church, or maintaining this building, even though those are all wonderful activities. Stewardship is about faith and discipleship. Stewardship is about each one of us recognizing that what we have, what we think we have, belongs to God. That we belong to God. Our possessions belong to God, our families belong to God, our secrets, ideas, hopes, fears, dreams, accomplishments... they all belong to God. And if all of that belongs to God, then everything belongs to God. It all belongs to God. Which makes us, as stewards, God’s people, day to day caretakers of God’s stuff, to be used to further God’s will.

Now, I know I’m treading on familiar territory, because those of you who have been here on any Sunday within the past month, or read the monthly newsletter, will have heard or read the phrase “it all belongs to God” at some point. But don’t zone out on me here, because now is when we go to the next step. Yes, it all belongs to God – as Christians, I’m going to take a wild leap and guess that we are mostly okay with that idea. God created Earth, and all that is in it, so yeah, I guess it all belongs to God. But what does that mean, really? What does that mean about how we live our lives? Does it have any impact at all? Is it just a phrase, or an abstract philosophy, or are we meant to have that reflected in our day to day activity?

Here’s a day-to-day activity with which many of you will be familiar. I live in an apartment, outside of the district. It’s a little studio, cozy, but it gets the job done. I pay rent around the first of the each month, in exchange for a key, some utilities, and the right to leave stuff there when I go out, and expect it to be there when I get back. And I can pretty much come and go as I please, cook what I want, watch TV and listen to music at a reasonable volume, and so on. But I can’t

knock out a wall to expand my living area, or paint the walls a crazy color, or do anything that could be perceived as permanently damaging to the unit. Why? Because I don't own the unit, I just live there. I take care of it, even as I use it to take care of me, but at some point, it's understood that I will give the unit back to its owners and move on. And if it hasn't been returned in good condition, I will incur a penalty. Of course, that doesn't stop everyone – some folks paint the walls orange, or poke holes in the walls to hang portraits, and they pay the price. But for the most part, tenants in the building recognize that the apartment they live in doesn't belong to them, and they treat it accordingly.

That example can only take us so far, I know. And I'm not suggesting that we are God's tenants. But it does demonstrate the difference between how one would live in an apartment and a home that they own. In your own home, you can paint the walls, change the fixtures in the kitchen, knock out a wall and put in a railing, install a disco ball – whatever you want. It's your space – at least, as long as you pay, or have already finished paying, your mortgage. But in this world, where everything, including everything you think you own, belongs to God, and you are a caretaker of it all, how does that affect how you live? Do you do things that forward personal interests, at the expense of the health and wellbeing of the environment, which God created? Or that exploit and disadvantage people who God created in God's image? Do we ignore the relationship that we have with God as a provider and grand caretaker, as described in today's psalm, and convince ourselves that we are the sole masters of our own lives? Or do we recognize the interconnectedness among ourselves and all the rest of God's creation, and that we are called to take care of that part of creation that has been entrusted to us, so that it can still be there to benefit those around us and those who come after us? Do we dare to pretend, or convince ourselves, that what we have been blessed with is actually all of our own doing only, and do we dare to keep what belongs to God to ourselves?

Have you noticed that I like to ask a lot of questions?

So, if we've established the fact that stewardship is not about fundraising or dues paying, but about acknowledging God as the source of our blessings and resources, and taking care of what belongs to God, and we've hopefully come to the conclusion that if everything belongs to God, and that we are caretakers, then that should be reflected in how we live our lives... well, then, we've done a lot already this morning! But there's one more question, and that is this: If what we think and what we do are not aligned, then how do we fix that? If we know that it all belongs to God, but we act like it all belongs to us, then is that problem? And how do we fix it? One thing I will say is that we're not alone in this, and it isn't a new problem. Even as far back as the time of Moses, he had to warn God's people, "Do not say to yourself, My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth." But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today." (Deuteronomy 8) The times may be different, but the problem is the same – it's so easy to fall into a false sense of ownership, and forget what enabled us to get to where we are, and how our achievements affect the wellbeing of others.

Now, I've been talking pretty much in a general sense, because I wanted to make the point clear that stewardship, taking care of God's Property, is all encompassing – people, planet, everything. However, it is the case that there are different aspects of stewardship, many of which are reflected in the stewardship committees that exist here at Epiphany. And so I am going to take advantage of having your attention up here to make a specific point about financial stewardship. And that is this: financial stewardship is not about "giving back to God." It is not saying, "God has blessed me so much, that I should give the church a little something as a token of gratitude." Stewardship is acknowledging that everything, even the wealth we've managed to accrue,

belongs to God. This is a point that is important to think about and really digest – all the time, but especially now as we get close to the end of this stewardship month, and many of us receive our pledge cards for the upcoming year. I hope that, when you see the card in your mailbox, you will think back to these words. God has “given us power to get wealth,” as Moses said in Deuteronomy, and as the author Charles Lane put it, “There is no room left for me to imagine that I am the source of my good life. God is. The proper response to the blessing of this life is not to pat myself on the back and try to find a way to get more stuff. The proper response is to give God the glory and the thanks and to ask serious questions about how I am called to use what God has entrusted to me.”

I say this, knowing that some who hear what I’m saying will dismiss my words by saying, sure that applies to wealthy people, but I’m not wealthy. I understand what you’re saying. By certain standards, I am definitely not wealthy. I’ve got student loans and other debt up to here – Sallie Mae and I are way too close for comfort. I live in a studio, I don’t own a car, and most of my stuff is second-hand, or from IKEA. But by the world’s standards, I am wealthy. I have so much! I have health, I have food, I have family who loves me, and friends who make every day a blessing. And all of that comes from God, and belongs to God. How can I not be thankful for what God has entrusted to me? Why wouldn’t I demonstrate my thanks, by using what has been entrusted to me to demonstrate God’s love to others? And not just in a passive way, giving a couple bucks a week in the plate when it comes around, but in a way that is significant enough to even approach the level of what has been entrusted to me.

I’d like to leave one last thought with you. Last Tuesday, at about 7:42 am, something remarkable happened in the course of American history ... and if any of you were up on Tuesday morning watching CNN or any other news stations, you might have heard about it. Apparently, according to the US Census Bureau’s clock, the population of the US hit 3 hundred million at that precise moment ... give or take a few weeks. Think about that for minute. That makes the USA the third most populous country in the world, after China and India. That’s a lot of people. In 2005, the population of DC was just over half a million, about 550,000 people, not including all the people who live outside of the district, but work, learn, or play here.

Because I was thinking about what I was going to say here today when I heard that news, I started to think, “what would the country be like if all 3 hundred million people lived their lives with the understanding that it all belongs to God? What would that look like? How would our interactions be different? Would anyone feel unloved, unnoticed, unworthy? Would everyone have enough of what they needed? Would we each feel God’s presence more directly in our everyday lives? Wouldn’t that be just great? Perhaps when Randolph preached about the District of God a few weeks ago, he wasn’t so crazy after all!

That idea isn’t too far off, and making it a reality is not so out of reach. It’s what we, as stewards of God, created by God and followers of God’s word, are supposed to aspire to. Perhaps it is what the apostle Peter was thinking when wrote, “Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received... so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.”