

1 Corinthians 16: 1-4; Mark 10: 17-27

Today is our third and last stewardship Sunday in which we focus on our stewardship of money. To recap – stewardship is our wise use of resources that we have been given by God. We use our time, talents, our money, our whole lives wisely, in accordance with how God would like us to use them, because it's our heart-felt response to God's love. We do this because we are grateful. The way we lead our lives is our response to God's great love for us and for the world and our worship of God. Money happens to be a very important part of our life and therefore how we obtain the money and what we do with it matters to God.

Also stewardship is not giving to the Church. Giving to the Church is a part of stewardship but stewardship is much wider than that. Stewardship is our use of all the money at our disposal – how are we using it? Where is it going? How does it reflect our priorities? Ultimately – does our use of our money – and the whole rest of our lives – worship God? It's a question of integrity.

The Very Rev Lorna Hood in her 'Moderator's Worship Notes' says the following about the parable of the rich young ruler: 'It is one of the saddest in the Gospels; that Jesus looked on him with love; that he walked away and Jesus let him go.'¹ Yes and no. Yes because we do not want to see anyone turning away from God's love. It pains us as it did Jesus. We want people to see and appreciate what we see and appreciate. I think though that this parable is teaching us something important. That all of us were created and given free will in the package. All of us are free to choose how we want to live our lives and we need to accept what people around us choose. Jesus is not begging the young man to stay. He doesn't barter saying: 'Ok then, how about you sell only half of your possessions??' I wonder whether sometimes we're trying to hold on to people far too much and for far too long, not respecting their choices and the decisions they made.

It's like in this modern parable from the United States of America which I like quite a bit. 'The story is told that Clarence Jordan, that great Southern, social prophet, visited an integrated church in the Deep South. Jordan was surprised to find a relatively large church so thoroughly integrated, not only black and white but also rich and poor; and this was in the early sixties, too. Jordan asked the old country preacher, "How did you get the church this way?"

"What way?" the preacher asked. Jordan went on to explain his surprise at finding a church so integrated, and in the South, too.

The preacher said, "Well, when our preacher left our small church, I went to the deacons and said, 'I'll be the preacher.' The first Sunday as preacher, I opened the book and read, 'As many of you as has been baptized into Jesus has put on Jesus and there is no longer any Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, males or females, because you all is one in Jesus.'

Then I closed the book and I said, 'If you are one with Jesus, you are one with all kind of folks. And if you ain't, well, you ain't.'"

Jordan asked what happened after that. "Well," the preacher said, "the deacons took me into the back room and they told me they didn't want to hear that kind of preaching no more."

Jordan asked what he did then. "I fired them deacons," the preacher roared.

"Then what happened?" asked Jordan.

"Well," said the old hillbilly preacher, "I preached that church down to four. Not long after that, it started growing. And it grew. And I found out that revival sometimes don't mean bringin' people in but gettin'

¹ http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0010/27379/S_and_F_-_Money_2015_-_Lorna_Hood.pdf.

people out that don't dare to love Jesus." (As told in Hauerwas and Willimon, *Where Resident Aliens Live*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1996, p. 103).²

Powerful story. The Bible speaks often of the need for pruning. In a farming community we are maybe more aware than in other places that there is a lot of truth in it: we need to prune plants to let them grow and flourish. There's deep wisdom in it and I can see God doing it in the Church of Scotland and other churches as we speak. That's nothing to fear but a process aimed at improving the plant and helping it flourish again.

How about stewardship in this context? We're asking you this year to reassess where you are in terms of your money. Is there something that needs to be pruned? Is there something that needs to grow in its place? Is there any change needed? Also maybe by giving money away and not holding on to it so tightly, we are released to be more and do more. In *Path of Renewal* we discovered that we don't need money to go out to the community. We are all the equipment that's needed. The energy that's been released through that has been truly transformative and life-giving. And in a very un-Presbyterian fashion we're enjoying the journey. Not quite like the live shows of *Mrs Brown's Boys*. They are unedited and you can see clearly how much the actors themselves are enjoying it – they fall about laughing, they can't keep a straight face and visibly have a great time. We are not quite that but we do enjoy the journey nevertheless.

Paul in his letter to the Corinthians suggests that we should set aside a sum of money every week. I doubt he said this to make the treasurer's life easier. He said it because he was trying to teach the Corinthians a discipline. He was trying to teach them to form a habit – of daily gratitude, of daily letting go and daily trust and reliance on God and God alone. Same still applies to us. Amen.

² <http://day1.org/1473-the-peril-and-the-promise-of-being-met-by-jesus>.