

1 Corinthians 3: 1-11, 16-23; Matthew 5: 38-48

Today we begin our Stewardship Season. Stewardship is our response to the generous gifts of God. It's acknowledging those gifts, seeing them for what they are – not what we've earned but what we were given – and responding to this generosity of God by using the gifts wisely. Stewardship is our response to God's love and commitment to us.

When we join a Christian Church, we promise four things: to join regularly with our fellow Christians in worship on the Lord's Day. That helps us grow and provides a community with which we grow and learn more about God's love for us.

We then promise to be faithful in reading the Bible, and in prayer. This promise helps us grow in the knowledge of God and stay close to Jesus throughout our life.

The third promise is to give a fitting proportion of our time, talents, and money for the Church's work in the world. This is part of stewardship – wise use of the resources that God has put in our hands and at our disposal.

The fourth promise is all-encompassing: to profess publicly our loyalty to Jesus Christ, to serve him in our daily work, and to walk in his ways all the days of our life. Every aspect of our lives is covered by this. Whose we are and to whom we belong influences what we do with our lives – which in themselves are another great gift of our loving God.

Today and throughout our stewardship season this year we're focussing on the third promise and more specifically on our stewardship of money: all of it, not just the part given for the Church's work. Our Matthew reading spells out the basis for our life, and by extension for our giving and stewardship. Jesus first outlines the existing laws of the Jewish people: 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' and 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' And then he adds the dreaded: 'But I tell you'. Jesus wants more. If we only do what's required, we're nothing special. There's nothing to boast about, nothing to indicate we live by the generous grace of the living God. 'If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?'

We are required to be more and do more. We are required to emulate God's own generous love and self-giving in the way we treat one another. Someone said that Judaism is a religion of justice while Christianity is the religion of love. We do more, we go the extra mile.

Protestant theologians at the time of the Reformation pointed out that the Law in the Old Testament was given to prove to us that we can't fulfil it by ourselves. We needed – and we still do – God's grace and help in Jesus Christ. Is this new law Jesus gives designed to make us feel inadequate too? No. This law sets the bar much higher than the old one did but it's there to help us aim higher. Why ever would we succeed this time? Because we are God's temple. God's Spirit dwells in us and he enables us to reach higher. He's active within us and he's the reason we are what we are. That's another gift of God that enables us to use other gifts of God well.

To take the pressure off we need to remind ourselves that the words the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians about them being God's temple were directed at the same folks who were divided over which leaders to follow, ate all bread and wine without waiting for one another and making sure everyone had enough and needed chastising by the same Paul for constantly arguing with one another. They were not perfect in any way except... in the eyes of God. They were his perfect children, worthy of love and indwelling by God's own Spirit.

We are perfect imperfect temple of God. The bar is set really high. At the same time we are God's temple. Which is to say: we need to look after ourselves too. There are so many competing demands on our lives, our time, our talents, our money. We can't do it all. Like Mary, Martha's sister, we need to choose what's better.

That's why we emphasise that it's supposed to be a 'fitting proportion' of our time, talents and money. It's between you and God to review how you use the resources he's entrusted to you and decide whether anything needs changing. Our circumstances change and that's why we're inviting you to reassess where you are at present. Should you give more? Should you give less? Should you reallocate some of your financial resources elsewhere? What is God calling you to do?

Matthew's passage we read today ends with the sentence: 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.' What is this perfection then? It's striving to be as loving, as generous, as compassionate, as understanding, and as faithful as God is. We know we can't achieve all this by ourselves and yet we know that God's Spirit lives in us and enables us to love our neighbour and ourselves more and better.

What would it take to see yourself and others as beloved temple of God? More rest and less stress? A better sense of where your next mortgage payment or meal will come from? A better sense of self-worth? Building and deepening relationships with people who seem very different? Spending more time in God's natural world? More listening and prayer? Your unique, honest responses to this question hold the keys to how God is calling you to steward the temple and the temples of others that God entrusts to you.

I'd like to finish with the "working definition" of Christian stewards, presented by the Stewardship Emphasis, Pacific North West Annual Conference, which I found in weekly stewardship reflections called 'Radical Gratitude'. It says: "Christian Stewards... are those who awaken to God's abundant, freely given grace permeating all creation.

As expressions of their awareness, stewards choose to enter into active partnership with God and others to lovingly care for every gift of grace that God entrusts to them.

As stewards grow in this partnership, every dimension of their lives becomes a witness of the living Christ and a channel for God's grace poured out to all."<sup>1</sup> The bar has been set high indeed. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.nwumf.org/images/radical\\_gratitude/year\\_a/rg\\_epiphany7\\_yra.pdf](http://www.nwumf.org/images/radical_gratitude/year_a/rg_epiphany7_yra.pdf), p. 3.