

BORN GENEROUS

Texts on Holy Trinity Sunday

June 19, 2011

Psalm 8; 2 Corinthians 8: 1-16

Our theme today is generosity. We'll ask where it comes from, what it can mean, how we can grow in it, why it matters, and what's at stake for a church of generous givers—or of non-givers. You could call this a stewardship sermon—but it's not *the* stewardship sermon. We're not going to do that once-a-year thing here, where people know in advance which Sunday to skip. This is not just my idea. It's actually in my contract with the Church Council, that I teach and shape practices of stewardship in fresh and faithful ways. How all the more happy I was to sign on that blank line, seeing the support of the leadership for setting a course toward a new relationship to stewardship.

What is stewardship? The word itself has fallen on rocky ground. Church people, pastors included, use it like a nose clothespin—a euphemism for something they don't want to touch: fund raising. We have come to a bad pass: along with sex matters, money matters figure hugely in our lives—yet neither gets much notice in church. It's as if we are disembodied spirits who are supposed to love. As if church is about God, while money and sex are where we really live, and God doesn't go there. This terrible habit of sticking God in the prayer room or in the pulpit, so that God stays out of the bedroom and the boardroom, out of your politics and your purchases and your preferences—this habit of walling God off from life has, of course, zero power over God. It has but one effect. It makes us see small and be small. It renders us anxious and ignorant, stingy, static, and mean.

What is stewardship? It begins with a call to your depths. You know how you call people you love together, so you can take a picture? Stewardship is calling your whole life together into the picture with your God. Listen to the psalmist. "What are human beings that you are mindful of us? Yet you have made us little less than gods. You have crowned us with glory and honor. You have given us rule over all your works; you have put all things under our feet." Come, get into the picture. Bring it all in. The good stuff. The bad stuff you haven't yet got control of. How you be family. How you befriend. How you eat. How you treat your body, good and bad. How you spend money. How you spend time. How you kill time. What you fear. What you hope. What you stand for. What you won't stand for. As great as that, and greater still, are the stores of inestimable value over which God gives you authority. This is your stewardship. You heard the psalmist: "You have crowned us with glory and honor." Take your crown.

Basically, stewardship is integrity. Good stewardship is as if your God

and you were going over every line in your checking account, and every hour of your days, and you are giving an account of each item with gladness of heart. Stewardship means coming to terms with the fact that some of what you do with your time and your money is profoundly wasteful, utterly disregarding the glory and honor with which God has crowned you. Stewardship means finding soul friends to help you re-order your life. Stewardship is about order, priority, integrity, clarity, vision, hope. When you get its meaning right, stewardship is the sweetest sound to ring in a seriously joyful life. In the words of a beloved hymn, "Take from our lives the strain and stress / And let our ordered lives confess / The beauty of Thy peace." That is the aim of stewardship. Can we get an Amen. Now, can we get some volunteers willing to help spread that spirit of stewardship in this church?

As most of you know, churches often have what is called a stewardship program, a stewardship committee, even a Stewardship Sunday. Given how immense and abundant and loving and embodied are the meanings of stewardship that we are considering today, doesn't shrinking stewardship down to one Sunday a year sound pretty dried-up, pretty mechanical? Alas, the word has fallen into bad use as the church's "special word" for fund-raising. And most of us have pretty mixed feelings about fund-raising. Why is church stewardship usually just about getting you to give up your money?

The simple answer is, Because you don't. It's kind of obvious. If generous, glad stewards filled the pews, concerned about the health of the churches, ready to give, then there wouldn't be single Sunday stewardship committees. It's the resistance to generosity that has given rise to the mechanical systems for church fund-raising that go by the name of stewardship. The proof of this comes to light through communities who do not struggle for support, yet receive much more from their members than most church people give, including Riverside. Jewish synagogues and Mormon churches offer two examples. The tradition in many black churches figures here as well. Recalling childhood experiences, Peter Gomes wrote about that pattern in *The Good Book*.

White people who visit black churches are often surprised and not a little shocked at the number of offerings given, and with the fine art of encouraging people to generosity. It takes them some time to realize that the giving of money is . . . the central drama in the act of worship . . . It was high theater for a child, with the whole congregation on view and in motion, the murmuring of the stewards as they counted, the relentless rhythm of the singing, and the anxious moments while awaiting the result.

Now, there are stewards in these churches, to be sure; just no stewardship Sunday. What can we learn from them about generosity, without mechanically grafting on practices that won't give fruit here?

The first thing is, you were not born generous. You were born selfish—and a good thing, too. All creatures, great and small, are wired for self-

concern, and those who have it not fail to thrive. But there is a wideness in God's mercy, who calls forth from disciples and servants more and more freedom from these automatic reactions of self-concern, freedom from the instincts that drive us to flee what we fear and pursue what pleases. Communities which hang together very closely, such as those we have named, work like laboratories for generating generosity in their members as they mature. Trust is high. The benefits of participation are felt by all. The community's identity is clear. Giving is free, at least within the community.

But where a committee is needed to pull the money out of most of the people, and nobody is having any fun, what is going on? It is the opposite of conditions in the tight-knit communities. It is *not* that people give more there because they have more. People withhold when they don't trust the organization, when they don't sense what it is about, when they don't feel a part of it and don't experience personal, spiritual growth. When a congregation has been through a crisis, all these conditions are aggravated. When a church commits itself to the high goals of including people from very different walks of life (and wheels and crutches of life, too), then the question of our identity is harder to discern. Only a more-sensitive spiritual nature can feel after it. It is harder to be born generous in such a society as this. The birth pangs are sharper. No stewardship committee can solve the stuckness, or force the birth. That means the whole community has to become more intentional in helping people grow spiritually.

Everybody loves that story of Scrooge's transformation in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. From a guilty, selfish withholding nature, he is reborn in justice and generosity. By means of those visits from the angels of past, present, and future, Scrooge sees all his good and all his evil come into the picture; terror and hope crowding in together. Then, by spiritual helps, he understands that he himself is in-dwelled by a Spirit greater than all his feelings and fears put together. He himself holds together, you might say. He has integrity and stewardship at last. He is born again, born generous.

This is your calling, too. That's why we love the story. The huge error of most church stewardship programs is to marinate you for several weeks in a soup of anxiety about "making the budget." No more. Stewardship is about midwifing you into generosity. That is all. You can see that we come to most money decisions with a cautious, ears-pricked, animal anxiousness to keep that expense down! What is the least I can pay? Of course! We were not born generous. The having-of-money feels like a shelter from the hazards of the future. Spending money on ourselves often substitutes for the love we crave. Money matters so much to us because we long to taste life, to feel the pulsing energies of our hungers and satisfactions in love and work and play and in dreams of the future. But so long as we hold back from being

generous in order to indulge these animal instincts, we forestall our birth in the generation of the just and generous. The whole point of a church's stewardship theme must therefore be to help you experiment with practices and disciplines that grow your freedom to place your attention, your time, and your money where it will do good, world without end. In this sense, you must give up in order to grow up. Abundant, generous, eager, as Paul wrote of the church in Macedonia—yet “according to what one has—not according to what one does not have”—that is, giving in proportion to means.

So how much should you give? How much should the church ask? You know the answer. Enough to make a difference. Enough to help give you birth as a new creature, free and generous. I've compared giving to that two tin-can and piece of string thing we enjoyed when I was little. If the string is slack, you can't hear a thing. If it's taut, the words come zinging along the line. Give till your line with God is taut and you can hear what God is saying to you through money decisions.

Many years ago, I was a new pastor in a small village church upstate from which the previous pastor had retired. After years of graduate school, I was glad to work again—and I had started giving to the church well more than my pattern during grad school. But well more than a small amount may still be a small amount. That is how I suddenly felt while sorting through office clutter—and found the old pastor's family budget, reckoned in his own handwriting. Amounts for all the usual needs were there—and also the offering for the church. I stared at the figure. It was the full tithe, the whole 10%. My face flushed. I had never met the old man; the general disarray had seemed like an epitaph on his worn-out ministry. But just now I was feeling spoken to by that man in a very lively way—questioned, tested, and tutored in a language I did not know. Could I let go of money like that? I thought: I could. Why then not? I decided I would give like that—a proportion that I could feel. Just ten minutes before, such a figure had seemed to me the far side of the ocean. Already now I could sense the flow and freedom in the decision. I was born generous then. And I have been born again since.

Some years later, I told this story to that church in a sermon with a stewardship theme. The treasurer came to me afterward with a funny smile on. “Great story, pastor—it's even got me thinking—but you know what! The former pastor never gave that.” Apparently, I learned the language from the practice book of someone who wasn't fluent in it. And I am still learning it. Not from a book, but by practice. That's how we're born generous. As Paul says—“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Amen.

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