

BORN GENEROUS

Texts on Sunday, November 15, 2015

2 Corinthians 8:1-16; Luke 12: 16-34

Our theme today is stewardship. We'll ask what it is, where a spirit of generosity comes from, how we can grow in it, why it matters, and what's at stake for a church of generous givers—or one that's not.

What is stewardship? The word has fallen on rocky ground. Church people use it like a nose clothespin—a euphemism for raising money, which they don't want to smell, not in church. We have come to a bad pass: along with sex matters, money matters hugely in our lives—yet the church hardly ever deals with either seriously. It's as if God's job is to spirit us away from our bodies and their energies. Of course, this habit of dividing God from real life has zero effect on God. It has only the effect of keeping us seeing small and being small, anxious, ignorant, stingy, mean, violent, and stuck.

What is stewardship? It begins with a call. Think how you call together people to take a picture. Stewardship is calling you—all your many selves—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 on! Get into the picture. Bring in all the parts of you. All the good stuff. All the bad stuff you haven't got a handle on yet. How you be family. How you befriend. How you eat. How you treat your body, good and bad. How you treat others. How you work. 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. These and much more are the stores of great value which God has put under your care. This is your stewardship—everything and everyone in your care, including the whole world, of which you are a citizen for a few decades, and which you must use well and justly.

Basically, stewardship is integrity. Good stewardship is as if your God and you were looking over every line in your bank accounts and credit card bills, and looking over how you spend every hour, and with a glad heart, you are giving God an account of each item, why you spend it this way, not that. Stewardship also means coming to terms with the fact that some of what you do with your life and your money is wasteful, showing disregard for the glory and honor with which God has crowned you. Stewardship means finding soul friends to help you order your life and your values. Stewardship is about priority, clarity, vision, and hope. When we understand the word this fully, stewardship is the sweetest sound ringing in a seriously joyful life.

Now, lots of churches have a “stewardship program” and perhaps a stewardship committee or a Stewardship Sunday. Given the immense, abundant, and all-embracing meanings of stewardship we are thinking about today, doesn’t the churchy “stewardship campaign” seem like dry potatoes? What has happened? Why has “stewardship” become just an awkward, if sincere, way to try to persuade you to give up more of your money?

The simple answer is, Because you don’t. It’s obvious that if generous, glad stewards filled the pews, as eager to give as those Macedonian Christians the apostle Paul was praising, then there wouldn’t be a stewardship committee or an annual campaign. It would all just flow. It is the *resistance* to generosity that results in the seasonal schemes we call “stewardship.”

The proof of this is that there are religious communities which do not struggle for financial support; they receive abundantly from their members. 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 certainly stewards in these churches—just no stewardship campaigns. What can we learn from them about generosity, without assuming that merely copying their practices would work here?

The first thing to remember is that you were not born generous. You were born selfish—and a good thing, too. Every creature is wired from birth for self-concern, and those who don’t feel it don’t thrive. This is why we naturally approach money decisions with animal-like caution, ears pricked to find out *what is the least I can pay?* Of course we do. We were not born generous. Sometimes having money feels like shelter from the storms to come. Sometimes spending money substitutes for the loves we crave but can’t get. 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. Money can make emotional electricity roll down our wires. Of course it can. But so long as we hold back from becoming generous, fearful of the future, we forestall our new birth in the generation of the generous and the just.

To help us feel the contrast between how we were born and what we risk losing if we are not re-born generous, Jesus tells the story of the rich man whose properties produced abundantly. Not a word suggests that the man

spent lavishly on himself. No, this rich man's obsession is not with sensuous pleasures. His great anxiety is to make more and more of *himself*. Just as rich men in our times tear down the laws in order to build more and more wealth for themselves, the rich man of the parable tears down his barns to no end but to make more. He is battling blindly with his fear that his life is worth nothing. Then one night, the angel of death comes visiting, and his doom is set. What is his error? That he never became a real human; never knew that God made him only little lower than angels; never discovered his freedom in God to give freely; never learned that in letting go, we grow.

Only "the nations" strive like this, says Jesus. "The nations" means all who have not yet decided to become human, born again generous. Now, everyone lives with these conflicts, just as much in churches where tithes flow as where there's no flow at all. What changes to give generosity birth?

Tightly knit communities, such as those we have named, work like laboratories for generating generosity in their members as they mature. They support one another to experiment with generosity, as God gives the gift of greater freedom from the animal-like fears and cravings which drive our thoughts and keep us small. In these communities, trust is high. The spiritual and emotional benefits of participation are felt. The community's identity is clear. And members are re-born generous.

By contrast, where a church needs to pump, push, or pull the money from its anxious, resistant people, all the conditions so favorable in tightly knit communities are reversed. People don't trust leaders, they don't experience emotional and spiritual growth, they don't sense the church's identity or connect with its mission in the community. Naturally, they withhold.

Now, it is a fact that it is more challenging to sense the identity and unity of a very diverse community, and it is therefore harder to be reborn generous there. The birth pangs are sharper; trust does not come so readily. But let's be plain: no stewardship program can dissolve this kind of stuckness and guilt-tripping members for small gifts only makes matters worse. No one can force new birth on people. It is a spiritual birth; it is a God thing. The only way forward is through an open confession in open meeting of how hard things are, and an open prayer, a Godly wish, in the hearts of all to become a seriously joyful community focused on helping members mature in spirit.

Everybody loves the 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 of love greater than all his striving and fear. All of him, past, present, and future holds together. He has integrity and a real stewardship at last. He is born again, born generous.

This is our calling, too, to wake like Scrooge. Scrooge does not suffer through a fall program marinating him in a sauce of anxiety about “making the budget.” Stewardship is midwifing members into trust and generosity. The whole aim of a church’s stewardship must simply be to help you experiment with practices and disciplines that develop your freedom to be generous—to decide with integrity how to put your time and money to good use. Day by day, a church full of stewards is learning that you give up in order to grow up—abundant, generous, eager—giving, as Paul put it, “according to what you have—not according to what you do not have.”

So how much should you give? You know: experiment [!] with giving enough to make a difference within yourself. Many years ago, I was a new pastor in a small village church. After graduate school, I was glad to be working again—and glad to start giving my church well more than I had during grad school. But well more than a little may still be too little

That is how I suddenly felt in my second week at work. Sorting through office clutter, I found the old former pastor’s family budget, reckoned in his own handwriting. It listed amounts for all the usual needs—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 of the office seemed like an epitaph on a 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 a proportion that I could feel. Ten minutes before, such a figure could not have occurred to me. Now in an instant I could sense the flow and freedom in the decision. I was born generous then. And it has been necessary to be born again since.

Some years later, I told this story to my church in a sermon. The treasurer came to me afterward with a funny smile on. “Great story, pastor—it’s even got *me* thinking—but you ought to know that our former pastor never gave that much.” It turns out I learned the language of generosity 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 in the church. That’s how we’re born generous. As Paul says—“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”