Stewardship: Response Ability

Genesis 1:26-28; Genesis 12:1-3 Kimby Young

Luke 4:16-21; Luke 6:38; Luke 12:48b September 22, 2024

John 15:7-12

Stewardship in the church is one of the most misunderstood topics. We sometimes think of it as primarily financial fundraising, when in reality that is just one small corner of what good stewardship means. Stewardship is about being responsible with the gifts we have been given. Being responsible with that which belongs to God and is on loan to us from God. That includes care for the world. Honor in our relationships. Using our time wisely. Identifying and developing our talents and skills. Being wise with property and money. Wise but also kind and generous. I chose this theme, not because it is the most important to our faith, but again because it explains a lot about who we are as Presbyterians. We try to be responsible in all things. And I chose to talk about stewardship because this theme best expresses the work of our fourth pillar – Finance and Operations. This pillar is intended to support the work of all the other pillars and missions of the church, to make everything we do possible. This pillar tries to be responsible in the care of money, building, property, and staff. Responsible. It’s a wonderful word. It doesn’t mean you’re in charge. It doesn’t mean you can do anything. It doesn’t mean you’re at the whim of others. Responsible. It means you care and help and support others. Responsible. Able to respond. To be responsible you must stay fit and flexible and focused – all at the same time. Response. Able. It’s a challenge. It’s a gift. It’s a calling from God.

Presbyterians are usually pretty good with money. Let me rephrase that. Sometimes Presbyterians are a little tight with money. Our Scotch heritage makes us careful in spending. Thrifty in spending. Some people joke that is why in the Lord’s prayer we say debts and debtors rather than trespasses. Sometimes we are more concerned about debts than sins. Or better said, sometimes we think of misuse of money as the greatest example of sinfulness. I hope you know I’m joking. The debts in our translation of the Lord’s prayer is not about money. It is about remembering all we have been given by God. Remembering all we owe to God. We want to be responsible. We want to be able to respond if something bad happens and we need that rainy day money. It is a fine balance of knowing when to save and when to share. That goes for time and talent, as well as money. There are limits and we don’t want to wear ourselves down by doing too much. We don’t want to leave ourselves wanting by not being careful. We want to be able to respond when needed. The thing is the limits of our resources are not as fixed as we sometimes think they are, or as we sometimes fear they are. I say, “I don’t have time,” far too often. I do have time. I just want to be careful how I use each precious hour.

So it is at church. We can’t do everything. We are careful what programs we choose to support, what missions we start, what new ideas we try. We are careful. We want to be responsible. And we are.

But here’s the thing. God’s gifts are not limited. God’s gifts are abundant and overflowing. God’s grace is infinite. God provides for us everything we need, and even more than we need. Being responsible not only means being careful. Being responsible also means trusting in God. Trusting that the God who loves us and leads us, will also provide all that we need to respond with generosity and joy. Sometimes resources are limited. But sometimes they are not. Fear makes us fall into the trap of scarcity and caution. Trust encourages us to be confident in God’s grace and to move forward in faith. We are responsible. We are able to respond by God’s grace.

Today’s scripture may seem a bit random – an eclectic pile on of ideas. And I do admit I chose quite a few passages today. Because the Bible is absolutely full of verses about responsibility and stewardship – care for others and trusting in God.

In Genesis 1 God creates humanity and gives us dominion. Not domination. But dominion over the fish of the air and the birds of the sea, and so on and so forth. God doesn’t set us over the earth as superior and more important. God calls us to be responsible and care for the earth and all that is in it. We are the image of God. Not those who can take and crush anything we want, but those who use the power we have been given in order to help everything and everyone to flourish. We have authority given by God. We must use that dominion as God would. For me that means love and care, compassion and encouragement. Responsibility.

In the second reading from Genesis, we see that this authority and responsibility has been passed down through families of faith. God calls all people to caring stewardship. But God knows that because sin – greed and selfishness, fear and failure comes in. God knows that sometimes humans fail. So God calls people of faith – like Abraham and his descendants – to be responsible when others might fall short. God says, I have blessed you, in order that you might be a blessing to all the families of the earth. And with each successive generation of faith God has passed it down – both blessing and call. That is our call today - Blessed to be a blessing.

In the gospel readings and in the life of Jesus we hear God’s call again and again – to be responsible, to care, to love as Jesus loves. We are called to respond to the needs of others and to share the gifts we have been given. Pay attention. Listen. Care. Share.

If you are blessed, if you have gifts, if you are loved, share as freely and as fully as you have received. As the verses from Luke remind us – the measure you give will be the measure you get back. From those whom much has been entrusted, much will be expected. I have heard these verses used as a kind of bargaining quid pro quo. If you give, God will give to you. And that is really the opposite of God’s intent. The truth is God doesn’t bargain, God blesses. It’s not that the gifts are only there if you believe it. The gifts are here already, whether we notice it or not – God’s blessings in abundance are all around us. Whether you believe it or not God loves you. God doesn’t wait to love us if we love God. God doesn’t wait to trust us if we trust God. God loves us first. God trusts us first. God entrusts us with gifts and blessings and talents and possibilities. God gives us everything we will ever need and more than enough. And God doesn’t do it to test us. God does it just to love us. Because that is who God is.

What the scripture is actually saying is that God’s gifts to us are free and clear – pressed down and overflowing. But sometimes we don’t see those gifts. We don’t trust that blessing. We fear and worry and wait for proof. We are cautious because – you know, the world is a mess, bad things happen. But the scripture says, don’t let the fear overtake you. Let faith empower you. Receive the gifts of a loving God. Receive the abundance and certainty of our God of grace. Believe and be blessed. Trust God. Then move forward as you are able. Respond as you are able. Beloved, blessed, beautiful and gifted children of God. Be responsible to God. Share the unending overflowing love that has been poured over you and out into the world. By the grace of God.