

## **20<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost October 18, 2020- Stewardship**

### **1 Thessalonians 1:1-10, Matthew 22:15-22**

Growing up at St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Charlotte, NC my family and I were at church almost every Sunday. Yet of those 1,000 sermons I heard growing up, only one still sticks in my mind.

It was delivered by the Rev. Robert Stackel, a former director of the World Hunger Appeal for the Lutheran Church in America who had retired to Charlotte with his wife, Virginia, and taken a part time call with St. Mark's as a visitation pastor. It was about this time of year, stewardship season.

Now, Pastor Stackel was a tall, thin man. A really imposing figure in the raised pulpit at St. Mark's. But he had a soft voice and delivery as I recall, one that drew you in despite his stature. What he shared in this sermon was his story of growth in his faith as expressed in his stewardship of what he had been provided.

He spoke of being a new pastor, fresh out of seminary when he and his wife realized that if they were going to be leading a congregation, they needed to model the behavior they were encouraging around stewardship. So, this young couple sat down together and figured the best way to start the journey was just to start. They figured a dollar amount they could give each week that would stretch them a bit, but was doable. Then, they converted that into a percentage of their income. That percentage was what they pledged to give to the church over the next year.

The biblical proscription from Leviticus 27:30 is that a tithe (10%) of what you have is to be offered to God, and you live on the 90%. That first percentage that Robert and Virginia came up with was far short of 10%, but they vowed to grow it each year. And they did. Not always by a full percentage, but growth none-the-less. Over the years they finally reached a tithe and Pastor Stackel said that when he and his wife sat down to talk about it, they realized they didn't miss it. So, they kept on going. Even after their retirement, a large portion of their income was given away.

I think I remember the story because it was told not to brag, or to shame, but as a witness of how one might approach stewardship of the resources we have been given. It also was inspiring, because I heard in this story of giving, a story of faith and growth in faith. One that put them in right relationship with the abundance that they had and their God.

It was with this story echoing in my head that this young associate in ministry, fresh out of seminary in 1996, stepped into his first call and thought, "Hmm, I'd better walk the walk here."

Now, there were challenges, only a part time call, debt to service, newly married. But I remembered the witness of Pastor Stackel and decided I would try this. So, I sat down and figured out what dollar amount can I afford to give that will stretch me, but was doable. One that meant some sacrifice, one less trip to the fast-food joint, or for a pop at the convenience store, or one less book to read. Once I had that, I figured what percentage of my income that would be. This is what I committed to give on my estimate of giving card. I also committed myself to grow that each year- some years it was a full percentage, others it was only partial, but

as the years went by I found that what Pastor Stackel had borne witness to was true... I didn't miss it. I found that I had enough to not only feed, shelter, and clothe myself and my wife, but enough for other fun things.

Doing this also helped me set in my own mind my relationship with my abundance. It helped me see my abundance. I chose a few things to allow myself to splurge on that truly fed my soul (books, tools) and was pretty frugal in regards to the rest. So that I could help feed the hungry, clothe the naked, provide shelter to the homeless. So that I might be the means by which God provides daily bread to my neighbor.

But, why do this? Why give 10% or anything back to God?

I have another fond memory from St. Mark's- singing in the youth choir at the 8:30 am service on Sundays. One of our favorite songs was based on Psalm 24, *The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof... the world and they that dwell therein*. I wish I could remember the composer/arranger.

This psalm, along with so many other texts in scripture reminds us of the relationship we have with everything. Nothing truly belongs to us. Everything is God's. For God created all that exists. The Sun, moon, stars, your life, the wood in the frame of your house, the silicon in your computers, the skill with your hands. The smarts of your brain. All this comes, ultimately, from God.

This is the point Jesus makes with the temple authorities. When he asks them whose image is on the coin, the word he uses is the same one used in Genesis 1:27, "So God created humankind in his own image. In the image of God he created them. Male and female he created them." Give to Caesar the things that

bear his image, and give to God the things that are God's. Well what belongs to God? The Jews listening then and Christians listening now know the answer to that... everything- for God is ultimately the creator of it all. Even us and our very lives belong first to God.

What we have- breath, money, shelter, food, cars, phones, are all things that we just get to be stewards of for a time. One of the confirmands asked in their worship notes what that word, steward, meant. In scripture, the steward is a servant or slave who is given authority and responsibility to manage their master's property or wealth on their behalf. The steward does not own what they manage, they have use of it only in the manner the owner wishes.

You cannot serve God and wealth, Jesus says. One way to make sure we are not serving our wealth, that we are keeping ourselves in right relationship with both God and our abundance, is through our stewardship of that abundance.

The offertory prayer in the LBW was this- We offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us, ourselves, our time, and our possessions, signs of your gracious love. Receive them for the sake of him who offered himself for us- Jesus Christ our Lord.

Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica and begins with the statement, God has chosen you, I know it. How? Because of how the Gospel has come among them and is visible in them...in their joy (even in times of trouble) and in the fact that the Word of the Lord has sounded forth from them in their words and deeds such that every place knows their faith in God. Many of those deeds they are known for are care for widows and orphans, the least of society. Care for their own

members in need. All made possible by offerings of the best of what they had of themselves, their time, and their possessions.

This, too, is biblical. From the beginning, the Jews offered to God the best of their flock, the first fruits of their fields. They offered to God off the top, not the leftovers. Abraham was even willing to offer his hearts deepest desire fulfilled- his son Isaac.

What happens when you do?

The joy that Paul speaks of the Thessalonians having. The joy of helping your fellow human beings that Jesse Graves bore witness to in his temple talk this week. The joy that we read in the stories of generosity our friends in Christ have shared with us from our Growing in Generosity Sunday. A shared joy that encompasses both the one giving and the one receiving.

What happens? A deepening of faith, as we come to grips with how much our wealth, getting more and holding onto it, has gotten in the way of our trust in God. A renewed sense, every day, of God's providing our daily bread- food, shelter, cars, clothes, spouse, children, friends, all that we need to live.

In the next week, we will be mailing to our friends and members an Estimate of Giving card for 2021. We would ask you and your family to prayerfully consider what of your abundance God is calling you to give next year, to complete that card, and then return it on Sunday, November 1. All Saints Sunday and our Commitment Sunday. We hope you bring it to worship and join us then, but if you can't or weather does not permit, we ask you to come and drop it off at the front door of the church between 10:30 and noon.

Karen and I have talked about our own giving and we have committed to make the baseline for our giving the total of our combined giving right now- both to the capital campaign and our regular giving. We will then consider how God is calling us to grow that amount.

I share this with you not to brag or to shame, but to witness to our own story of how God is calling us to be. We trust that the Holy Spirit will guide each of you in your own discernment.

I and our Stewardship Team pray that this Stewardship Campaign would be one that helps you grow in faith towards God and in right relationship with the abundance that you have been given to steward.

Because we wish for you the joy that is found in being the means by which others are provided daily bread. Because as we do, we bear witness to the one who has given us everything. A witness in word and deed to all the world about our faith in the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ.

Because in our stewardship we affirm that God is god and nothing else is.