

The Gospel of Stewardship: The Church
“The First Question”
Acts 2:42-47, 4:32-35, I Peter 2:9-10
First Presbyterian Church
October 15, 2017

We are right in the thick of our stewardship season and also in the middle of a sermon series entitled “The Gospel of Stewardship”. Last Sunday we posed the question: Is grace for sale? We took a brief walk through the history of the church and found that the answer is: “Yes, it seems the church has always tried to sell grace to keep itself afloat.”

And yet, last week we also remembered what we have always known: that grace is free... that we don't deserve it and we can't earn it... and that it's not just for some of us, but for all.

It is this grace that is the foundation for our stewardship... what we do in our stewardship is always a response to what God has already done for us. Hopefully understanding that stewardship is not only about money, this morning we look at how our response to God's grace might be expressed in and through Christ's church.

Bible Reading

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

32Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. 33With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 34There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. 35They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Sermon

There are two (somewhat new) realities in the church world today: one is “church shopping”... the other “church hopping.” Some of you remember the day when Presbyterians who were new in town went directly to the First Presbyterian Church without passing “GO.” No checking out several pastors' sermons online... no comparative shopping for youth programs... no taste-testing their Wednesday night suppers. Not too long ago it mattered what denomination's name was on the sign out front. Some of us can remember that day.

Well, for better or worse all that has changed and those old denominational loyalties (that long shaped the American church) are weakening.

People shop for churches like they do for anything else – looking for the right minister or theology... scouting out a worship style that's comfortable or a lively program for their children and teens. And "church *hopping*" is the same as church *shopping*... it just happens AFTER something changes in the denomination or in a particular church or even in you.¹ There was a time folks might ignore some action their denomination took... or try to outlast an unpopular minister... or would pitch in to build up a children's and youth ministry. But that time is largely past and folks are more than willing to hop from church to church depending on what a church offers them.

And I understand this... I really do get it. Whenever I retire, Kris and I will start looking for a church and you can bet we'll church shop. And it's entirely appropriate for you to ask what FPC offers you... and to expect that together we will do whatever we can to meet the spiritual needs of our members. But there's another question I think you ought to ask... and it's NOT the SECOND question... it's the FIRST. You need to ask what YOU can offer the church.² And when I say "what you can offer the church," I don't just mean in money or volunteer time... that's a question for Rotary or the Service League. What I mean is what you can offer the church as people who have been given the free gift of God's grace... as folks who have been called together by the unconditional and inclusive love of God into this thing we call "the church". How do we respond to God's unconditional love in the church?

I have long struggled to find just the right words to describe what the church IS. The NT uses images like the body... the bride of Christ... the vine and branches... the community... the fellowship... chosen race... royal priesthood... holy nation. And all of those are good and helpful images... but all of them are also limited as they try to express the utter uniqueness... the true specialness of the church. For whenever the church has truly responded to the unconditional love of God it has become something unique and special – more than a just religious country club... more than a helping organization... more than an institution that preserves religious beliefs and practices. It becomes something more... a "community-in-a-very-special-sense"... and we call it the church.³

So rather than trying to find the PERFECT WORD or IMAGE to describe the church, perhaps we should simply look to Scripture... and listen to Luke as he describes how the early church responds to the free and inclusive love of God. Listen to how Luke paints a picture of the "stewardship" of early church.

They met constantly to hear the apostles teach about Jesus... and to share their common life by breaking bread together and praying together. A sense of awe was everywhere as many marvels and signs were brought about by the apostles. All whose faith had drawn them together held everything in common: they would sell their property and possessions and make a general distribution as the need of each required. With one mind they kept up their daily attendance at the temple... and then, going to private houses, they would share meals with great joy as they praised God together. And here's what Luke says was the impact of their life together – they

¹ Michael Lindvall in *A Geography of God* (WJK-2007), 88-89

² Lindvall again.

³ Thomas L. Are, *My Gospel of Stewardship* (Lay Renewal Publications-1977) p. 11-12.

enjoyed the favor of all people... even folks outside the church respected them and held them in high esteem... and day by day, the Lord added to their number those whom he was saving.

It really is quite remarkable what Luke says about those who had been touched by God's grace: united in heart and soul... meeting constantly... praying together... sharing meals... holding everything in common so that there was never had a needy person among them... bearing witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And seeing the quality of their life together, the people around them would say without sarcasm or irony: "See how these Christians love one another." Friends, this kind of community is only created through the unconditional love of God... and nowhere else in our world is this being taught as a way to live. Only in the church.

Now in the interest of full disclosure, there's no historical evidence that these early Christians actually did all these amazing things – at least not all at once. Yet, still I am captivated with this picture of a community in which folks spend significant time together focusing on God... in which no one feels unwelcome or excluded... in which folks are cared for body, mind and soul... and in which they are held in high esteem even by those who do not believe as they do. I am captivated by that... and to tell the truth a little ashamed when I realize how often I fall short (WE fall short) we fall short of Christ's intention for his church.

So thinking about what we might do as stewards in the church, I want to suggest four responses to God's unconditional grace. First is actually something I can do. I can make a renewed commitment to proclaim God's grace as often as I possibly can.⁴ That may sound strange coming from a Presbyterian pastor, with our emphasis on grace and all, but the truth is that sometimes I find it easier to talk about sin and human failure... or at least to emphasize what we SHOULD and OUGHT to be. And because of that, I need to make sure that when I do this it is always within the great glad news that God loves us unconditionally. If there is nothing else I remember from one of my doctoral classes in preaching it is to always... always... ask: "Where is the gospel in your sermon? What is the GOOD news you are proclaiming to your people?" You may know the New Testament word for "church" is *ecclesia*. *Ecclesia* is the Greek word for church... but interestingly, it is not a religious word. Back in NT times, before there were newspapers and TVs and smart phones, the only way to get the news was to gather several times a day to listen to the town crier. Well, that gathering to hear the important news of the day was called the "ecclesia". And knowing this the NT writers chose this word to describe the church – since the church is the community gathered to hear the good news of God's love. A big part of my job as your pastor is to remind us all of that good news in sermons, in Bible studies, in counseling... as often as I possibly can.

Second, since the church is formed by the grace of God we need to always remember WHO we really are. Of course, there are some clichés to help us: D.T. Niles famously said: "A Christian is just one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread." Another said: "Christians are not perfect, just forgiven." And from Pope Francis: "Sometimes, I speak of the Church as if it were a field hospital. This is the mission of the Church: the Church heals, it cures."

⁴ Are again, p. 14-15.

Well, as you know clichés become clichés because there is always a kernel of truth in them... and so it is with these. The church is not a special club for those who have already arrived, spiritually speaking... it is a fellowship of “traveling companions” who are still very much on the way. We follow Jesus together... and needless to say, we do so less than perfectly. We follow Jesus without knowing everything about him; we only know enough to trust him as Lord and Savior.⁵ So, since the church is formed by the grace of God we need to remember that we ARE all beggars... we are ALL forgiven sinners... each of us is wounded and broken and in need of this “field hospital” called the church.

Third, I fear that you may tire of me saying this but since the church is created by the unconditional love of God I believe that the church is a place (and maybe the ONLY place) where people who differ and differ passionately can remain in relationship with one another. Sociologists tell us that in this country we continue to sort ourselves into smaller and smaller groups of like-minded people which live in the same neighborhoods and whose kids all go to the same school and who all listen to and read the same news sources. Yet, because we are ALL sinners saved by the SAME free gift of grace that was made known on the SAME cross... because the Spirit of Christ lives in each of us... we can hope to find what unites us... what we hold in common... even when we disagree... even when we hurt each other. Because let’s face it – no matter how much I try to love everyone, I will eventually offend someone... and no matter how much someone tries to love everyone like God does, at some point they are going to wrong or offend me. Frankly, this is for me the most exciting dimension of a stewardship that is based in the unconditional love of God – *it breaks down barriers we put up between us... it reconciles people who would normally stay apart*. If God’s love is unconditional for me... then it’s also unconditional for everyone else – including anyone I may perceive as being hurtful or insensitive or just plain wrong! And as one who has received God’s love and forgiveness, I cannot deny that love and forgiveness to my neighbor (whoever it may be)... I cannot not do whatever is in my power to rebuild a relationship with someone who is estranged from me. Jesus wants the church to be different, my friends... different from the way the world deals with disagreements and conflict and broken relationships. And the truth is – we can only be to the world what we are first to ourselves. The church has to be different so that the world can see there is a way... a better way.

And finally this. John 3:16 – that well-known passage which is called the gospel in miniature – it says, “For God so loved the WORLD that he gave his only Son...” I emphasize “world” because our stewardship – if it is created by the free grace of God – cannot stop with our families only... or our church family only... or our city or our nation only. Contrary to a message that is spreading all across our world, the gospel of stewardship in the church calls us to affirm that God, in Christ, is concerned with all nations... and all people. This doesn’t mean we know how to solve all the world’s problems, I certainly don’t! But what we do know... from years of studying Scripture... is that God cares about the world’s problems... and that for us, as God’s followers, to look at any segment of our society or any oppressed people anywhere and say: “It’s their problem, not ours”... is just as foolish as my saying, “Hey, do you know your end of the boat is sinking?”⁶ “For God so loved the WORLD that he gave his only Son...”

⁵ Lindvall, p. 88

⁶ Are, p. 37.

My friends, when we are at our best, the church is where we hear about God's amazing grace... and it's where we practice our thankfulness for that grace so freely and unconditionally given. The church is where we invite and welcome others to hear and practice with us. What this means is that there is no way to be the church without a deep appreciation of the word "together". Together we learn to walk in the way of Jesus. Together we praise God and pray and break bread. Together we share what we have so that no one has need. Together we discover who we are and experience the life Christ offers us. And God willing... when those around us witness us "together," may they respect us and hold us with esteem and even say: Look how those Christians love one another."

Charge - Pope Francis:

This is the mission of the Church: to heal the wounds of the heart, to open doors, to free people, to say that God is good, God forgives all, God is the Father, God is affectionate, God always waits for us.