

Stewards

Genesis 1:26-31, Psalm 24:1-2

First Presbyterian Church

October 6, 2019

Genesis 1:26-31

²⁶Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” ²⁷So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. ²⁸God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

²⁹God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. ³⁰And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so.

³¹God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Psalm 24:1-2

The he earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it;
for he has founded it on the seas,
and established it on the rivers.

Sermon

Surely you have heard the one about the Jewish man who bought a condominium next door to a strict Roman Catholic family? Every Friday the Jewish man would grill out a big, juicy steak... and since his Catholic neighbors didn’t eat meat on Fridays the aroma of grilled beef about drove them nuts. What could they do? They couldn’t call the police – it wasn’t against the law. And they couldn’t afford to move. So, they decided the only alternative was to convert the Jewish man to Catholicism so he would stop grilling on Fridays. And sure enough, they got him converted... they presented him to a priest who baptized him saying: “You were born a Hebrew... you were raised a Jew... I now baptize you a Catholic.” Problem solved! Until the next Friday night when there he was out behind the condo grilling a big, juicy steak. The Catholics couldn’t believe it! “He seemed so sincere! How could he backslide so soon? Maybe he doesn’t understand about meat on Fridays. I’ll go next door and explain it,” the man said to his wife. But just as the Catholic man rounded the corner, what did he see... but his Jewish neighbor looking over the big slab of beef on his grill, and saying in a slow and sanctimonious tone: “You were born a calf, you were raised a cow... I now baptize you a fish!”

My friends, I fear that's what the church has done with stewardship. The game of raising money to fund the ministry of the church has stayed the same... we've simply renamed it "stewardship." So, let me lay my cards on the table right here at the beginning. We are entering what in the church is infamously known as "stewardship season." It is the time when we church members are reminded that the ministry and mission of our congregation costs money. And to be precise, for our congregation it costs over \$1.2 million dollars every year.

What does that money do? you may ask. Well, somewhere around 30% immediately goes to mission – to meeting the needs and changing the lives of people who may never darken the doors of our church because they slept in a tent last night or in a room at Exodus Homes or happen to live in Guatemala. The lion's share - somewhere around 50% - goes to provide salaries and benefits for our incredible staff so we can serve you and our community and not starve while doing it. Some goes to maintain this wonderful facility which is used by us and our community more than any church facility I have ever served in. And the rest makes possible this worship service right now... as well as programs for spiritual growth and fellowship for all of us – literally cradle to grave.

"Dear Abby" received a letter containing an article one day. The article was titled, "Is the Church Costing Too Much?" The writer of the unsigned article told a personal story... he wrote that "On June 2, 1940, a daughter was born into our family. She was expensive from the very beginning: clothes, food, medical expenses, prom dresses, college, graduate school, and then came the wedding. Five weeks after she was married, she was struck by a sudden illness and it took her life." The story ends with this statement, "Our daughter has not cost us anything since she died." Then the note to "Dear Abby" ended with this: "As long as the church is alive, she will cost money. And the more alive a church is, the more it will cost. Only a dead church... is no longer expensive. Think it over. Is the church really costing us too much?"¹

I don't think so... the ministry and mission of this church costs money... and that money will only come from me and from you. It won't come from the government... it won't come from United Way... it will only come from you and from me. And it is without the slightest hesitation that I stand here each year and ask you for it... because I know two things to be true: first, the church needs it and will use it wisely... and second, you need to give it. There is something in us – I think it is the image of God – that makes us want to give... to share. And when that is missing (for whatever reason), we are less human than we are made to be. The grateful heart wants to give... has to give... if it is to find its full expression. I believe that!

However, if that was ALL I could say about stewardship... (if all I could say is that you need to ante up so we can fund the church budget each year) it would be no better than grilling a big, juicy steak and baptizing it a fish. A different name... but the very same game.

¹ Leonard Sweet, *Homiletics*, No. 2, April/June 1995.

So, this morning Heather and I are introducing a series of sermons we will be preaching this month in which we will try to “rescue” (or perhaps a better word is “reclaim”) to reclaim the breadth and richness of the Biblical image of “stewardship” – and we will even suggest that you might use this image, the image of a steward, as a way to think about who you are as a child of God...

- as a disciple of Jesus Christ...
- as a citizen of this great nation
- as a citizen of this world.

Who you are as a child of parents and a parent or grandparent of children... who you are as a business owner or teacher or salesperson... who you are as a resident of the Hickory community and as a member of this church. According to Scripture, stewardship is about WAY MORE than money. It's about who we are... and why we were created... and how we are to live. As always, we begin with the Bible... which, by the way, is preoccupied with these questions: we see the plants and fish and birds and animals, but who is this human creature? Just who is this strange speaking animal?²

I think of Wendell Berry, and specifically of his book, *What Are People For?* Because that's the question the Bible is so very curious about that: What are people for? And one attempt at an answer comes on the very first pages of Scripture, Genesis Ch. 1 which I read earlier. And what we come to understand through this wonderful story is that from the very beginning, you and I are relational creatures... we exist in relationship with God on the one hand, and all the rest of creation on the other. There may be many ways to define what being “human” means, but the biblical way is that from first to last, we are “relational.” And though our ongoing temptation is to separate ourselves off from both God and all the rest of creation... this is God's design – that we be accountable to our Creator God and responsible for our fellow creatures... in other words, that we be “stewards.”

In the Hebrew Bible, a steward is actually a “job” – it's an official position that was filled by a servant... BUT not just a person who takes orders and carries them out. A steward is more of a “higher level” servant – sort of like a “supervisor” – who is given authority to make decisions and give orders and take charge. He (and I'm afraid at that time stewards were all “he's”) he would have had the trust of the owner so he could properly maintain and manage whatever it was the owner put in his charge. Over time though, the picture of the steward evolved and developed so that in the Gospels and Paul's writings, stewardship became essential to the way followers of Jesus thought of themselves. In this case, the master is not a landowner or an earthly king, He is the risen Christ... who has ascended into heaven but has chosen disciples to care for his household – he has called them and given them the special responsibility to feed and care for and protect his flock. This is simply another way of talking about one of our foundational beliefs as Presbyterians – that God chooses some to be a blessing for all.

The fancy, theological word for it is “election” – the doctrine of election.³ But the idea is pretty simple: God chooses or “elects” some people to work for God's purposes for all people.

² Douglas John Hall, *The Steward – A Biblical Image Come of Age* (Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 25-39.

³ Hall, p.36.

God chooses a few among the many, but not for their own sake and salvation but for the sake and salvation of all. They are made “stewards” of something very special – treasures, mysteries, the Gospel – stewards of something that is intended not only for themselves, but for “all the families of the earth” (as God told Abraham when he chose him). The stewards of God’s universal grace are given MUCH... but they are a means to something greater... they are blessed to be a blessing. And so, it is with each of us.

Well, this is what we’ll focus on in the coming weeks – to look to the biblical image of stewardship NOT as the way to fully fund the church’s budget (although that is important), but as the answer to Wendell Berry’s question – what are people for? The great Protestant hymn writer, Isaac Watts, captured this many, many years ago - when in the final verse of “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”

WE SING:

“Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small.
Love so amazing, so divine, demands my heart, my soul, my all.”