

Giving Because Of Our Faith

As most of you know, I play racquetball two or three times a week. I have been playing this sport since high school. Usually when I play, I am playing doubles. Playing doubles requires a certain amount of trust in those playing with you, when you enter the court. Let us think about this for a moment. Here you have, usually four grown men in a concrete and Plexiglas enclosed box, swinging metal racquets at a rubber ball that can travel in excess of 100 mph when struck correctly. You are trusting, the people you are playing with, will not hit you with the ball - at least not on a regular basis. Due to your partner's indolence, you are hoping you will not carry a majority of the strategy in the game and have to do all the running on the court in order to score. You are also trusting that your partner has a certain knowledge and skill level in the sport to help you defeat the team you are playing against. In numerous ways, this is exactly what it takes to be a good steward. It requires trust. It requires trust in God, your faith, strength from the Holy Spirit and support from the community of faith around you. You will hear these things preached about in the coming weeks. As Miroslav Volf says, "It's in the community that the Spirit suffuses our giving with hope; we hope because we are part of a community of hope. It's in the community that the Spirit molds our character; we display a life of virtue because we live in a community that values and fosters virtue."¹ The virtue I am seeking to strengthen in this parish is how to be a better steward for God, with the resources He has given us. My goal in this Project Thesis is to make stewardship a daily way of life, not because of budgetary coercion or guilt, but from the foundation of faith, gratitude, formation and proclamation.

¹ Volf, Miroslav, *Free Of Charge – Giving and Forgiving In A Culture Stripped Of Grace*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2005, Pg. 119.

Our motivation and attitude towards stewardship goes directly to our identity as Christians. An individual's viewpoint about "Giving depends on the proper attitude toward three things: toward things we possess, toward others, and toward ourselves."² What we do with the resources God has given us in time, talent and treasure, speaks volumes about how we have chosen to live out our Baptismal Covenant. Every day the world is telling us to have less of an identity as a Christian and to make choices that are focused on us as individuals. So often, either we receive messages consciously or unconsciously that say, do not give your time, talent and treasure away for the good of the community or growth for the kingdom of God. Seek your own way and do what satisfies your desires. We as "Americans are being persuaded that becoming more vain, materialistic, and self-centered is actually a good thing. This can happen even if you're not particularly narcissistic but just get drawn into what everyone else is doing".³

One of the problems we have in seeking to understand stewardship, is that we have not been given a well-defined explainable definition of what Christian stewardship should be. We are accustomed to hearing over the years that stewardship is about time, talent and treasure and certainly, that is true. Unfortunately, when this is spoken what people really hear is, "treasure, treasure and treasure." However, I would like to offer you a broader definition of stewardship. This definition of stewardship comes from John Westerhoff in his book *Grateful and Generous Hearts*. He writes this:

Stewardship is about giving up the love of possessing and practicing a life of simplicity; of developing the habit of giving things away; of buying only what is absolutely necessary; of rejecting anything to which we are becoming addicted; of learning to enjoy things without owning them; of developing a greater appreciation of and respect for the natural world;

² Ibid. Pg. 107.

³ Twenge, M. Jean & Campbell W. Keith, *Living In The Age Of Entitlement – The Narcissism Epidemic*, Free Press, New York, N.Y. April 2009. Pg. 38.

of rejecting anything that will result in an injustice for others.⁴

This definition of stewardship is much more comprehensive than most traditional views of stewardship. It speaks directly to our beliefs, values, and attitude towards money, possessions, power and competition. It aids us in the daily challenge of giving all of ourselves to God.

When I read this definition, the Offertory Sentences that I say each Sunday from St. Matthew come true “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasure in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”. (*New International Version 2009-Matthew 6:19-21*)

Each day we are faced with choices between obtaining earthly abundance or heavenly reward. This choice, usually laudably decided, does not preclude shelter, sufficient annual income or money for discretionary spending, but it does require that a person should not be addicted to worldly material gains. Depending on the individual, the choice between earthly mammon and heavenly reward will look different. Some might be called to a lifetime of Godly dedication to the poor and sick, such as is found in the life of Mother Teresa. Her reward was not found in earthly possessions or comforts, but showing the face of God to all that were in need. For people that dedicate their life-work to non-profit organizations, it may mean a lifetime of partial inadequate financial resources. Living daily with the minimum and working with the provisions that are available is amenable to them. However, for all persons it requires having a heart for God and daily practicing their faith.

⁴ Westerhoff, John H., *Grateful and Generous Hearts*, Morehouse Publishing, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 1997. Pg. 33-34.

How does stewardship become a daily way of life? Stewardship becomes a daily way of life by practicing the trust and faith that we have in God. Stewardship becomes a daily way of life upon realizing all that we have in life comes from God. Stewardship becomes a daily way of life from letting go of control. As Christians “If we believe that what we have is ours because we earned it, we’ll have a hard time giving. We’ll expect everybody to earn their possessions, just as we think we earned ours. On the other hand, if we believe that God has given us everything, then giving will be our way of living.”⁵ Our need to control is a sign of self-centeredness and insecurity. And one of the things we love to control is money and possessions. Trusting in God is based upon the belief in our powerlessness. Spiritually knowing we cannot have life abundantly without God. Accepting the abundance and grace of God, only comes when we come to the realization that we pray for God’s will in our life, not our own. Because we believe in God, “Faith is an expression of the fact that we exist so that the infinite God can dwell in us and work through us for the well-being of the whole creation. If faith denies anything, it denies that we are tiny, self-centered specks of matter who are reaching for the stars but remain hopelessly nailed to the earth stuck in our own self-absorption. Faith is the first part of the bridge from self-centeredness to generosity.”⁶

So the question remains, how do we express our faith through stewardship? It is my belief that we express our faith by tithing or giving 10% of our time, talent and treasure to God through the church. As St. Peter said, “As each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God’s varied grace.”(1 Peter 4:10)⁷ When I have talked to people about tithing, they often say do I tithe out of my gross or my net. Jokingly I usually respond do you want God to bless you, according to your gross or net.

⁵ Volf, Miroslav, *Free Of Charge – Giving and Forgiving In A Culture Stripped Of Grace*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2005, Pg. 107.

⁶ Ibid. Pg. 44.

⁷ New International Version 2009, Zondervan. .(1 Peter 4:10)

In Nehemiah, it says, “We also assume responsibility for bringing to the house of the LORD each year the firstfruits of our crops and of every fruit tree. Moreover, we will bring to the storerooms of the house of our God, to the priests, the first of our ground meal, of our grain offerings, of the fruit of all our trees and of our new wine and olive oil.”⁸ The tithe is not about giving our leftovers or snippets. It is about giving our first and best to God. Promising to tithe forms a covenant with God. Tithing is a spiritual act of the heart and mind. The bounty God has given us, will determine its place in our lives according to the heart, revelation and relationship that we have with God. Does it take discipline and intentionality – absolutely? Tithing is an action of the first priority. It is the first fruits of the harvest.

To conclude our individual practice of giving, will depend on our attitude toward money and possessions. Through prayer and faith, we decide in life our needs versus wants and our commitment to use what God has given us to build the kingdom of God. When we believe God has given us everything we possess, then stewardship becomes a daily way of life. We are glad to give and ready to share, because God has shared His grace with us. Because of God’s blessings, the pledging of our time, talent and treasure are not believed to be a burden or obligation. We know in our heart, mind and soul it is by God’s generosity we have all that we possess.

Regular practice of steward and benevolence is now part of our faith practice. It is who we are as Christians and we are grateful for the identity that we have in Christ. We are called to a life of faith, hope and charity because of Jesus Christ our Lord. Jesus died on the Cross for our sins, so that we may have life and have it abundantly. One of the greatest things we can do, as one of His disciples is give back a portion of our possessions to show our faith, commitment and devotion to God. Amen.

⁸ Ibid. (Nehemiah 10: 35, 37)

