

Sermon 10.16.16

Pastor Josh Ferris

Stewardship Sunday 1 – *Live Generously*

Deuteronomy 8:11-18 | Malachi 3:10-12 | Titus 3:1-7 | Matthew 20:1-15

Over the next few weeks we're going to talk about *stewardship* in worship. And I know that as soon as I say the word 'stewardship,' some people get uncomfortable, thinking it just means the pastor is about to ask for money. Research has consistently found that people *dread* pastors talking about stewardship and money. And yet, the only thing Jesus talked about *more* than money was the kingdom of God. He believed it was important, that there's a connection between our faith and how we use our resources. So this morning, relax – this isn't a hostage situation, and you're going to be okay.

In fact, I'm barely going to talk about money at all this morning. To be honest, my hope is that this sermon helps you to grow in your understanding that stewardship is about a lot more than money, and is bigger than just giving to the church. Stewardship is a way of life, a way of living in response to God's blessings and gifts.

So to help me this morning, I brought twenty-five friends along. You can't see them, they're not up here with me – they're sitting with you this morning. A few weeks ago I emailed twenty-five members of our church with seven questions about stewardship and giving and generosity, and most of this morning's sermon will be quotes from them. You'll get to hear what other people in our faith community think about stewardship and generosity. And if you're one of the twenty-five who *hasn't* yet responded, please know you still can, and our conversation will be richer if you do.

So, where to start? In the beginning, I guess. The very beginning. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Sounds familiar, right? Genesis 1:1. That’s where stewardship starts, with *God* creating. The heavens and the earth. The land and the sea. The sun and the moon. Plants and animals. And finally, humanity. The story of creation shares one simple truth: that God made everything. Psalm 24 puts it this way – “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.” (Psalm 24:1) We just sang the words this morning: “This is my Father’s world!”

But after God created humanity, something interesting and amazing and unprecedented happened. God gave what he had created to humans, telling them to care for creation and watch over what God had made. (Genesis 1:28, 2:15) God looked at Adam and said, “Hey buddy, why don’t you give these animals some names?” (Genesis 2:19-20) Rather than keeping what he made for himself, God chose to share it with humanity. God invited us to take hold of this world and to use it well. To use it responsibly. To use it according to *God’s* design and purpose. From the very beginning, God chose to share what was his. God chose to be *generous*.

And if I could sum up stewardship in two words, it would be the same words that 80 of us wore yesterday on t-shirts as we gave our time and energy and hands to package 20,000 meals. The same word used at the end of our Gospel reading. The same words I heard from members of our church: *live generously*. To be a good steward is to live generously.

Stewardship starts with the understanding that what we have doesn’t belong to us. Not really. It belongs to God, and God has chosen to share it with us. One member of our church said, “I think you should think [of what you have] not as *yours* per se, but you are merely a guardian of it. It’s like you’re the executor of an estate – you’re in charge of where it all goes,

but it's not really yours." This is brilliant! A steward is someone who manages and looks after *someone else's* property. A member of our church who loves *The Lord of the Rings* and scored major points with the pastor said that as steward of Gondor, Denethor's job was to use what was entrusted to him on the king's behalf, until the king returned. That's what a steward is.

Which means that stewardship is about a lot more than money. And people in our church know that. One person said, "Being a good Christian steward is to use *every blessing* that has come your way to God's glory. Your money, and your skills, and your time." Another said that a good steward, "knows how to prioritize and utilize resources they have for the benefit of God and everyone around them." Yet another said, "to me a steward...[is] someone who has responsibility to 'take care' of whatever is placed in your care."

So the first question this morning is this: what has God placed into your care? What has God given you and with what has God entrusted you? Not just money, but skills, talents, property, a body, a family, time, friends, passions, the creation around us...the list goes on and on. And the second question is this: how do you think God wants you to use those things? Good stewardship isn't just about money or giving to the church, it's realizing what God has given to you, and then intentionally living in a way that best uses those things to honor God, to give thanks, and to love the people around you.

To be a good steward is to live generously in response to God.

To give generously.

To share generously.

To love generously.

To serve generously.

One member of our church said that living generously means, “giving of your time and energy to help others without expecting anything in return.”

God dares us to live generously! In our second reading this morning, God said, “Put me to the test.” (Malachi 3:10) Give generously. Live generously. “See if I will not open the windows of heaven and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.” God dares us to live generously, saying that if we do, we will be blessed with a sense of fulfillment and abundance, a sense of peace and goodness and a deeper faith. Someone in our church wrote, “One of the great unspoken rules in life is, ‘The more you give, the more you get.’” Another wrote, “Our family’s life has been enriched by other’s generosity and kindness and we feel strongly about doing so for others.” And another person simply said generosity “and sharing and helping is contagious.” When we’re generous, our lives are enriched and blessed.

Being generous pulls us deeper into the mystery of God, it strengthens our faith. It expresses our faith. *In giving, we receive.* A beautiful member of our church who has a really cute six-month-old daughter said, “We were created to be in relationship with one another. God created us to have that need. And by being generous and helping those near to us and far from us, it opens up a relationship, why is why we feel so good when we help people. Generosity fills that need that we were created with.” Another person wrote, “My most rewarding moments are those when I know God is using me to show compassion and caring.” Someone else clearly agreed, and said, “Jesus makes it clear in the Bible many times, both in his instruction and his actions, that we are to be generous. When you are faithful, it leads to generosity; and when you are more generous, it makes you more faithful. The times in my life I have felt *most faithful* were also the times I was *most generous.*” A person wrote to me, “When

I [give] – that makes me feel like a deep part of my soul has been fulfilled, and I feel whole.”

Another said, “Faith and generosity go hand in hand.” Being generous is a way of living out our faith. Generosity sets us upon the path of following Jesus.

And it’s something God invites *all of us* to do. *You* have gifts to use generously. *You* are able to bless and serve others with generosity. One person in our church wrote, “I hesitate to give sometimes because I think I will be judged on how well I do ‘giving’ – Did I give enough time? Did I give enough money? Was I good enough at organizing this event? When I helped out recently with [something the church did] I realized that ‘giving’ is not about being perfect, it is about ‘giving’ the best we can.” Another said that sharing your time and talents can feel scary, but that it’s still worth it. It’s still what we’re called to do as God’s people.

Perhaps the most powerful thing someone wrote to me was this simple sentence “[we] give because we have been blessed.” And this is the deep truth when it comes to stewardship. All of our generous living is a response to how generous God has been to us, and how much God has blessed us. Our reading today from the book of Titus says, “When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we have done, but according to his mercy.” (Titus 3:6) When it comes to living generously, it’s a response to what God has already done for us in Jesus.

God is the generous one, and if you want to get a sense of what that means, then consider the parable Jesus told this morning. He said God is like a landowner who went out to find people to work in his vineyard. He hired people early in the morning, he hired people at 9:00am, he hired people at noon and 3:00 and 5:00. When evening came, it was time to settle up with everyone and pay them. And rather than paying much less to those who had only

worked a few hours, the landowner paid everyone for a full day's wage. And when some complained this was unfair, the response was simple: God isn't unfair. God is *more than fair*. God is generous.

God's generosity is the reason Jesus came to this earth, to show *you* God's love and light. God's generosity is the reason Jesus died on the cross, to bring *you* forgiveness and grace. God's generosity is the reason Jesus rose again, offering *you* new life, eternal life. God's generosity is the continued promise of love and grace and forgiveness in *your* life, the continued gift of blessings in *your* life, the continued assurance that God is with *you* and you are never alone, no matter who you are, what you've done, or where you've been. God's generosity is given to you. And in response, God calls you, God challenges you, God *dares* you to be generous towards others. To live generously. Go ahead. See what happens. Amen.