

## LIFE AS A STEWARD

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Surveys of church folk of any denomination indicate nervousness when the subject of faith and money is raised. For some reason, we assume it will make us uncomfortable and we decide quietly to endure what ever is said in order to get it over with so we can move on to the real issues of faith.

Now we are very conscious of the need to raise sufficient funds to pay the bills of our congregation and most of us also want to ensure we send dollars to help with the outreach of our congregation and the mission work of the church. If this is so, why are we uncomfortable with the subject of our personal assets and our role as stewards of these key resources?

When we are asked for our time and energy, we are more than willing to do what we can. However when we are asked to review our financial giving to the church, it becomes an awkward discussion.

What is stewardship in the Christian context we may well ask?

We do know when we say stewardship we are not speaking of the following words relating to God's relationship with us and our resources:

- User fees – God does not charge user fees for our usage of the earth for the time we are here – the earth is God's gift to us
- Fines – God does not punish our shortfalls in this way demanding high financial payouts as fines to pay for our sins
- Rent – God is not exacting or expecting rent for the time we are on earth – earth is ours to respect and appreciate but it is a free gift of God
- Taxes – God does not demand a portion of anything God gives to us as a demanded tax back
- Tribute – this is the amount people must pay if they are a conquered people by another people – God never asks tribute from his people for God walks with us as beloved free creations

The key point in this is that God gives us the freedom to decide what we want to share with others of the bounty we have received here on earth

So what is a realistic definition of stewardship for us? There is a definition of stewardship I like and this is it: "stewardship is the management and/or care for resources for which one has no ownership."

This definition I believe very much assists us as we examine Christian stewardship. To understand the concept of stewardship, we need to revisit the basics of our faith. Fundamental to our faith is the belief that God made the world and everything in it and that God was pleased with the order God created out of chaos. This act of creation

included the initial deliberate creation of men and women and those who have followed through later generations. God created humans with whom God could and does relate.

The Great Creator created each of us and holds us as precious and of value. We believe that it is God who has given us the things we need to live, to relate to one another and to be creative on earth. All we have comes from God.

The Hebrews through their journey across the centuries beginning with Abraham to the time of Jesus, developed the theology of ownership of the things we have on earth. Central to the faith in one supreme God was the belief that God entrusted creation to us to steward while we were on earth. In other words, no one owned anything outright for everything was ultimately the property of God.

Also coming from this experience and belief was this concept: to those to whom much has been given, much more is expected.

Typical of men and women, discussions have been held throughout time as to what proportion or percentage should we give back from our collected bounty. Out of this dialogue grew the concept of a tithe which for the most part was deemed to be 10%. Then typical of humans, the discussion centred around 10% of what? Was that a portion of total income before tax or a 10% portion of after tax income?

Have you ever been at a restaurant with family or friends and got trapped into a discussion of how much tip to pay the waiter or waitress? Once there is consensus on the figure of 10% or 15%, the discussion moves to the question: is it the pretax or the after tax amount which forms the basis of the tip calculation?

It is so human to enter into these discussions. We rationalize our ways by saying we are just being careful with our money or we do not mind paying our share as long as the calculations are fair or we do not want to overtip or we enter a discussion about how it is high time the restaurant owners pay a decent wage so we do not have to tip.

My point here is that very often we do not allow generosity for its own sake to bubble up and have much play. We do know that we owe everything to God but at the same time, it is not easy to part with money which so often is hard to accumulate.

You recall the story Jesus told of the widow's mite given as her offering in the temple. Jesus and the disciples had watched as the faithful placed their dollars in the collection baskets in the temple. Some gave a great deal with a very public demonstration of giving their gift. Then there was the poor widow who gave a very small coin as privately as she could before she disappeared. Who do you think was the most generous giver asked Jesus? Was it the seeming devout acting man or the widow? Of course the answer was the widow who had given all she had without any show. The widow's gift was the most generous of the gifts given to the temple even though it was the most minute gift of the day for this gift was indeed a sacrifice for her.

Today we are reviewing stewardship within the context of the needs of our congregation and those of the larger church sharing resources with the more needy across the globe. We need to stop and look at our giving patterns on a regular basis. This is not just to look at the amount we give to the church, charities, etc. It is also to look deep within our hearts at our attitude to giving.

Are we generous by nature or do we tend to be calculating in our giving? Are our gifts for others calculated each month from what we have left over or do we see our giving to the church and charities as one of our key monthly expense decisions which becomes our normative way of life?

One only has to be a TV watcher, a reader of papers or a keen observer to know the state of most of the world and that of many of the less fortunate in the world. When Jesus spoke to the disciples of the rich man, we understand only too clearly that the rich man is so many of us in Canada.

Worship, the proclamation of the gospel throughout the world and the sharing of outreach programs whether they be for poverty, housing, justice or hunger or numerous other causes, are all important. We know these programs need dollars, our dollars in order to do the work so needed in the world.

We are stewards of God's bounty for our time on this earth. Last Wednesday at our joint Ash Wednesday service with Christ Church Anglican, we had the sign of the cross of Christ placed on our forehead with ashes. The words said as the cross was placed on our forehead were these ancient words, a reminder of what we are to remember.

"Remember, you are dust, and to dust you will return".

We came into the world naked and we leave it as we came. While we are here on earth, God shares God's bounty with us to act as God's stewards of what we have been given or earned with the skills and capacities we have been given. Let us as a people be generous, mindful of the value of what we give for the proclamation of the word, for worship, for mission, for evangelism and social service, for justice and for the care of each other.

Next week we will meet after worship for our Annual Meeting as a congregation. We must not look at it as just another necessity but as an opportunity to celebrate God's presence among us and the generosity of God's people.

Stewardship: the management and/or care for resources for which one has no ownership. How blessed we are to be in a position to be stewards of resources that permit us to be generous and to make a difference.

Thanks be to God, our God who entrusts us as followers of Jesus Christ our Lord with precious resources, skills and assets; our God who trusts us to live as generous people, eager and grateful to be able to share from our bounty with others.