

Giving Back

Stewardship Emphasis Sunday

Luke 19:1-10
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
October 30, 2022

Let's see, where to start this Stewardship Emphasis Sunday sermon? Earlier this week I googled "Bible verses on Stewardship." I can't say I was surprised by the results, because I have used all of them in the past to explore what it means to be a good steward. Here are a few, which I suspect most of you have heard before as the basis of a stewardship sermon.

1 Peter 4:10 "Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.

2 Corinthians 9:6-7 "The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

Luke 6:38 "...give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

Acts 20:35 "In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

And everybody's favorite, one from the Old Testament Hebrew scriptures, a passage loved by prosperity gospel preachers and those that demand a full 10% (a tithe) of their income to be given to the church.

Malachi 3:8-10 "Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, 'How are we robbing you?' In your tithes and offerings! You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me—the whole nation of you! Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing."

So, which one of those would you like today? You could probably preach your own sermon on any one of these. As it turns out, the biblical text I'm using today to get into the topic of good stewardship is none of those, and the one I've selected may at first seem like an unlikely choice. It's Luke's story of a wealthy tax collector named **Zacchaeus** who, after climbing a tree in order to get a glimpse of Jesus, enters into a relationship with Jesus and ends up turning his life around. Verses 9-10 conclude the

story with Jesus' declaration, "Today salvation has come to this house, because [Zacchaeus] too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Humanity came to seek out and to save the lost."

After what begins as a story about a lost soul seeking to get a glimpse of Jesus, we learn that all along it is Jesus who seeks out and saves those who are lost! That's Jesus' mission and a continued work attributed to the Holy Spirit. And that's good news for those of us who are lost and need to be found, sometimes time and time again.

Today, however, I'm not going to focus on the theme of how the Divine, the Sacred Presence that is beyond, beside, and within us, initiates relationship with us by reaching out to us – internally and through others – in our lostness. Instead, I'm going to narrow in on **our response to that gracious act**, especially how it can inform our understanding of good stewardship.

Part of Zacchaeus' salvation was that his mind was transformed from being obsessed with greed (as evidenced in his role as a 'rich' tax collector working for the Roman Empire), to a heart of generous giving. His encounter with Jesus led him to declare that he would give half of his possessions to the poor, and to give back to anyone he defrauded four times the amount he took from them. Perhaps this story reveals that **like Zacchaeus, our all-too-common desire for getting more and more needs to be transformed – literally 'turned around' – to giving more and more.**

Zacchaeus' response took the form of real action when he promises Jesus, "I will give back..." It is extremely important to note, however, that he does not make this offer to give back in order to earn or win Jesus' approval, but rather as an expression of his gratitude to Jesus for transforming his life. Zacchaeus is not bartering for his salvation, which is impossible anyway according to our understanding of God's unmerited grace, but is instead responding to the loving and accepting Presence of God in his life.

I have always held that whether we experience and express gratitude, or not, can act as a kind of barometer of our spiritual condition. The level to which we practice generous sharing, or 'giving back' if you will, acts in much the same manner. This story, therefore, has a lot to teach us about *our* response to the loving and accepting Presence of God in our lives, which in turn translates into our approach to good stewardship. (You knew I'd get to stewardship sooner or later, didn't you!)

Perhaps first and foremost, I think that we should allow ourselves to be influenced by **the grateful model Zacchaeus' enacts, which involves his response of actively giving back to the community.** As Presbyterians, it is a traditional belief that we are blessed by God so that we, in turn, may be a blessing to others. We do that, in part, through the life and ministry of this congregation. Out of hearts filled with gratitude for the transformation of our own minds and hearts, we are given the opportunity to give back a portion of our time and energy, our talents and skills, and our financial resources – our very selves! And not only do we benefit, but so does our neighborhoods, the people around us, and beyond.

Here, then, is what I think is the healthiest approach to good stewardship that we can adopt. In an article entitled, "How to Talk About Stewardship," published back in 2009 in thepresbyterianleader.com, the **Rev. Jon Brown** reflects:

Too often, we go at stewardship backward. That is, we begin by presenting the results [in the form of a proposed budget] and ask people to back into the numbers we list as the cost of carrying out our church's ministries.

Instead, **we should begin with a generous response to God's love as a spiritual practice and then meld that with a shared passion and vision for what is possible to carry out in mission and ministry.** That is, we give primarily because God has created us to be a generous people. It is one of the ways we reflect God's image.

It just so happens that as we give generously, the community of faith is then capable of carrying out a variety of ministries that bear witness to God's love at work in the world.

He also writes, "**Perhaps a better way of thinking about stewardship is to consider the concept of care** — caring for ourselves, caring for creation, care-giving for those lives entrusted to our oversight, and care for the community and ministries embraced by the household of God... Ultimately, the way in which we direct all our energies and resources is a reflection of our values and beliefs. It is an outward expression of our inward spirit."

That is why **we understand our church budget as a spiritual declaration of our intentions to participate in God's work. Good stewardship is our faith at work. It is indeed our grateful response to a gracious God.** It is the recognition that we belong to God and are called to care for one another and our interconnected web of relationships, both inside and outside these church walls.

So, on this Stewardship Emphasis Sunday **let us reflect upon our own practices of giving back.** How can you and I give back a portion of our time, our educational experience, our talents, our financial resources, and even our influence to help shape the community to reflect God's vision of a world filled with generosity and justice.

Amen.

Resources:

Rev. John, Brown, "How to Talk About Stewardship," www.thepresbyterianleader.com, 2009.