

Stewardship of Gifts and Debts

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Exodus 9:29 Moses said to him, "As soon as I have gone out of the city, I will stretch out my hands to the LORD; the thunder will cease, and there will be no more hail, so that you may know that the earth is the LORD's.

Psalms 24:1-2 The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; ² for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.

Matthew 6:1-4 Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. ² "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Stewardship of Gifts and Debts

The Stewardship Committee has chosen a marvelous theme for this year's stewardship season - *BELIEVING IN TOMORROW!* Christians are a people, a community, a faith that believes in tomorrow. We talk a lot about an everlasting tomorrow, a heavenly tomorrow, a resurrected tomorrow. Oh, we're all about believing in tomorrow. But, there are tomorrows that lie right in front of us that also need our attention – the 26th of September, the day after that, and the coming weeks, months, and years. Living fully and faithfully in today and in today's tomorrows prepares us for our eternal tomorrows.

As the church, as a fellowship, and as the body of Christ, we're summoned to be believers – effective, useful, growing, lively disciples. How does this usually tend to go? Very often, an individual congregation finds that it has a finite lifetime of its own. There's birth. A congregation is begun. The people have hope. They have a vision for times to come. They believe in the church they seek to become. They believe in the tomorrow of their fellowship.

At some point, they find what can be referred to in a positive way as stability. They reach a level of enrollment that is a comforting size. They have the worship, the facilities, the classes, the fellowship activities, and the outreach that seems to fit them and their dreams of what being church involves and how it fits in with their life and their needs. And so, the congregation settles into "don't fix what ain't broke" and keeps doing what's been working. There's a saying that, "If you keep on doing what you've been doing, you'll keep on getting what you've been getting." That's almost true. It isn't true over a long period in this phase of stability and repeating programs. The reason is that while the programs of the church don't change, the times and the people do change, and they diverge. Younger generations have grown up in a different time and culture. They're less likely to live in the same town as their parents, they marry later and divorce sooner, they may never have written a handwritten letter, have scores of possible activities available for their children, expect information to be instantly available and to be visual information more than written or spoken, and they generally live life at a faster, and sometimes less thoughtful pace. While their parents were likely to follow in the religious ties of their own parents, at least two generations of adults now have grown up exposed to a great variety of ethnic and religious expressions that can either bewilder or entice them. In short, "We're not in Kansas anymore, Toto." So it is that what was first seen as stability can become stagnation and then weakening of the very vitality of the congregation. The plain term for this is decline. The congregation spends its energy, attention, and resources of every type on maintaining structures – administrative structure, program structure, worship structure, and especially physical structure. It's a matter of keeping up appearances of health and vitality,

but if nothing changes, the congregation becomes a thin shell of its former vibrancy and health. Collapse and demise eventually come.

This lifecycle of the individual church is very common, but it is absolutely not inevitable. Only one thing needs to be different to make it all different. Vision. Vision is the crucial factor that builds up an individual - and vision builds up a community of faith. This isn't a new finding in sociology or the study of church growth dynamics. The Book of Proverbs is over two thousand years old. **Proverbs 29:18** "Where *there is* no vision, the people perish." We must have vision. We will glorify God as we open our eyes to a vision of God and God's love for us. We will grow as disciples when our vision expands to understand that just as God seeks us out, so must we seek to deepen our relationship with God. And just as we seek to know God's will for all of us, so must we seek to carry that out by not only loving God with all our heart, but loving our neighbor as we love ourselves. That compassion will give us a vision for meeting human need.

What gets in the way? Ownership. There's a very cute animated movie titled *Finding Nemo*. Really good animated movies speak to the child in all of us - and the adult in some of us. In this film, there's a flock of seagulls. Every time there's a scrap of any thing edible or shiny, the seagulls converge, whirling, fighting, competing, and all yelling loudly, "Mine! Mine! Mine!" It's all about me. It's all about I must have and therefore you must lose. More is never enough. I want it all! Mine. Ownership. The old words are greed and covet. We need to recall the old words and know them for what they are. Unloving. Evil. These are things that are destructive. They can and will infect us, twist us, and devour the good within us if we aren't careful. They cloud and blind our vision with darkness and fear.

Pharaoh was the very personification of power, domination, total control, and absolute ownership of land and people. Moses said, "I will stretch out my hands to the LORD; the thunder will cease, and there will be no more hail, so that you may know that the earth is the LORD's."¹ The earth is the Lord's, not yours. You lie to yourself when you say it belongs to you. Several centuries later, a songwriter was more gentle and poetic. **Psalms 24:1-2** The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; ² for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.

This isn't just a Hebrew thing. When Paul and Barnabas were preaching in the central region of modern Turkey, they so impressed the locals that they were thought to be Zeus and Hermes and the local folks wanted to worship and offer sacrifices to them. Paul became distraught and ran into the crowd saying, "Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. ¹⁶ In past generations he allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; ¹⁷ yet he has not left himself without a witness in doing good-- giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy." (Act 14:15-17 NRS) Turn from these worthless things – these idols – and that means everything that we tend to idolize – turn from these worthless things to **the living God!** God supplies your need because God loves you! We witness God's love, we see God's love in the acts of God — giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy!

This morning the choir sang *Fairest Lord Jesus, Ruler of all nature* – which includes the meadows, woodlands, the cheerful colors of springtime, the sunshine, the moonlight, and the twinkling stars. Gifts – all gifts – given to us, not because we earned them, but because we're loved. Two of today's well known practical theologians are Sean and Leigh Anne Tuohy, although I doubt that they think of themselves as theologians. They're the couple who took in, raised, and legally adopted Michael Oher, the story told in the movie *The Blind Side*. Sean and Leigh Anne say that when we really grasp the depths of God's generosity to us – even the sun, wind, and rain - then what we feel in our hearts is a spirit of cheerful giving. The Tuohys don't give because they have lots of money. They were reaching out to support God's work way back early in their marriage when they were worried if they could pay their utility bills. They don't give because it's easy to write a check. They give because God's blessings – even the sun, wind, and rain - fill them with joy.

We must have vision in order to have vitality. The attitude of ownership can cloud and distort that vision. The scriptures keep trying to bring us the message of God's gifts and how they can fill our hearts with joy. But if we let go of our highly developed sense of ownership, what remains? Are we just to be free spirits, wandering around in some sort of euphoria, waiting for manna and quail to fall into our laps? Leigh Anne Tuohy says in her incisive way, "God gives us money to see what we will do with it. God owns everything and allows us to keep it for him. He only asks that we be responsible stewards."² We're stewards. A steward is someone who manages someone else's possessions. All that we "own" actually belongs to God, and we've been entrusted with it as God's personal stewards. This isn't just money. The same could be said of time, abilities, aptitudes, families, our bodies, our speech, our authority, clean water and blue skies. What we have, and our capabilities, are literally from God to be used to honor God by meeting our basic needs and serving others. Ownership turns us inward, building a shell between us and life. Stewardship unfolds us. We reach out and take care of ourselves and others. Ownership robs life of meaning. Stewardship fills life with purpose and usefulness. It gives life profound meaning.

When we don't use our God-given talents and resources with good stewardship, we dishonor our maker. Thoughtless and unwise debt is a form of bad stewardship. Joshua told the Israelites to keep God's will in their hearts day and night so that they would be prudent.³ The apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, urging them to behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one.⁴ Many of us float in a sea of debt. Are you the Leaning Tower of Visa? I have some experience with debt - and I've learned that the quest for ownership tends to imprison us in a cage of debt. But we increase our freedom and gain control of our lifestyle when we adopt the outlook of stewardship and reduce our debt. Here is yet another way that we can rightly understand the prayer to forgive us our debts! Our debts get between us and stewardship. Lord, forgive us our debts!

Finally this morning, let's look at one particular type of giving – offerings of generosity and alms. This is when we respond to some immediate situation that speaks to our heart. The special offerings we receive through the year are about specific issues and needs. Things like disaster relief, care for aging ministers, education for minorities, and programs to spread peace in neighborhoods near and far. A part of this type of giving is the alm. The term "alm" comes from the name of a small coin in the time of Christ. The alm is a gift, often secret, to a person in need.

We heard the passage from the Sermon on the Mount a few minutes ago. Jesus cautioned us about practicing our piety and our giving in order to be praised by other people. Another contemporary theologian, Denver Moore, who we came to know in *Same Kind of Different as Me* puts it this way. "But when you reachin out to folks, 'specially if you just reachin out when other folks expects it, you got to ask yourself – is you doin it for God, or is you doin it for you? The things you do for nothing is the things you keep forever, 'Cause when you servin . . . 'cause you 'xpect something – maybe like your friends is lookin at you like you is some kinda saint, or it's the holidays, and you feel guilty 'cause you ain't done nothing for nobody all year – then you ain't doin it for "nothin." You doin it for somethin. If you doin it for something, you already done got paid. God don't pay no overtime. Don't give yourself credit for what you do. Don't let your right hand know what your left is doin. If you lookin for pride and prestige and glory, you lookin for trouble. We got to put our pride aside and take care a' God's business."⁵

Denver makes the point clearly that a person's true character is shown by how a person acts and reacts to someone of no consequence in his life whatsoever. Who you really are, is who you are when no one is looking. There's no tax deduction or receipt for a gift that is given in secret. ---- But dare we admit that we are more motivated by tax savings than by compassion? Alms giving opportunities are everywhere. The food you share by putting it in the red wagon in the hallway. The meal you carry in your car to hand to a homeless person holding a sign at the side of the road. Move from ownership through joy to stewardship and find freedom and purpose that points toward real self-worth. When we open our hand, God blesses our heart. When we change our vision, our future changes. Believe in the future that God invites us to live! Amen.

¹ **Exodus 9:29** Moses said to him, "As soon as I have gone out of the city, I will stretch out my hands to the LORD; the thunder will cease, and there will be no more hail, so that you may know that the earth is the LORD's.

² Sean and Leigh Anne Tuohy *In a Heartbeat: Sharing the Power of Cheerful Giving* "God gives us money to see what we will do with it."

³ ^{NRS} **Joshua 1:8** This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful. (Jos 1:8 NRS) *you will be in the way that thrives and you will be prudent. Meditate on the law day and night so that you will do.*

⁴ **1 Thessalonians 4:10-12** But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more, ¹¹ to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, ¹² so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one.

⁵ Denver Moore, *What difference do it make?* (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 2009) p 55