

*The Stewardship Thing*

Jubilee Mennonite Church

June 9, 2019

**Message:** How we regard our resources of time, talent, and treasure, directly speaks to who we are as people of faith.

**Purpose:** To examine the relationship between worship and work as is expressed within the practice of stewardship, and the role of the Holy Spirit within our stewardship.

**Scripture:** Psalm 23, Acts 4:32-37

**Synopsis:** Stewardship, often thought of as shorthand for money, is something that we just don't want to talk about. We are intrinsically part of a culture whose understandings resources as a right, something to be possessed, preserved, and provided for a long future where all our dreams can be brought to fruition. Our resources, regardless how we understand them, are ours first and foremost, the fruits of our considerable labor, and those outside of our family should have little to nothing to say about it. It is when we bring an understanding of God providing our needs that we can more fully understand the that what we do and how we worship are intrinsically linked.

**Acts 4:32 - 5:11**

<sup>32</sup> Now the whole group  
of those who believed  
were of one heart and soul,  
and no one claimed private ownership  
of any possessions,  
but everything they owned was held in common.

<sup>33</sup> With great power the apostles gave their testimony  
to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus,  
and great grace was upon them all.

<sup>34</sup> There was not a needy person among them,  
for as many as owned lands or houses  
sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold.

<sup>35</sup> They laid it at the apostles' feet,  
and it was distributed to each  
as any had need.

<sup>36</sup> There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to

whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas  
(which means "son of encouragement").

<sup>37</sup> He sold a field that belonged to him,  
then brought the money,  
and laid it at the apostles' feet.

<sup>RS</sup> **Acts 5:1** But a man named Ananias,  
with the consent of his wife Sapphira,  
sold a piece of property;  
<sup>2</sup> with his wife's knowledge,  
he kept back some of the proceeds,  
and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet.

<sup>3</sup> "Ananias," Peter asked, "why has Satan filled your heart  
to lie to the Holy Spirit  
and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land?"

<sup>4</sup> While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own?  
And after it was sold,  
were not the proceeds at your disposal?

How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart?  
You did not lie to us but to God!"

<sup>5</sup> Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died.

And great fear seized all who heard of it.

<sup>6</sup> The young men came and wrapped up his body,  
then carried him out and buried him.

<sup>7</sup> After an interval of about three hours his wife came in,  
not knowing what had happened.

<sup>8</sup> Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you and your husband  
sold the land for such and such a price."  
And she said, "Yes, that was the price."

<sup>9</sup> Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together  
to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test?  
Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door,  
and they will carry you out."

<sup>10</sup> Immediately she fell down at his feet and died.

When the young men came in they found her dead,  
so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband.

<sup>11</sup> And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

Today is Pentecost. Today we celebrate the coming of the Spirit to the body of Christ—the long promised companion for the disciples come and resides with them, infusing the witnesses to the way of Christ with power, ability, and boldness that was to launch the whole of the church. This is when the Spirit comes with wind and with fire and inspires speech and action like no other, reminding us that we have been given a charge and an inspiration like no other. The spirit, the advocate, the companion is the inspiration and movement of Christian spirituality, calling us time and again to celebrate the movement of God's Spirit in our midst.

Which means it is the perfect time to talk about Stewardship.... I'll give that a few seconds to sink in. No that can't be right; Spirit and stewardship seem to be as odds. Stewardship, most of the time, is the thing that we substitute in for talking about the necessary evils of church existence—the budgets and ways and means that we sit with not because we like them, but we because we must. Let's see a show of hands for everyone who finds the offering the essential element of the service. Ironically, I have spent more time with offerings than many elements. There never seems to be the right time or the right way to pause and ask for support from our sponsors. The offering of our resources can become a bit of a chore whose role within the larger understanding of worship is somehow out of place, muddling the grander concepts of God and devotions with the issues of pragmatism and light bills. What does it mean to give of ourselves in this way? How can giving be an act of worship, connecting the hum-drum realism of offering our resources to the eternal expressions of a relationship with the eternal God; can the financial report have anything to do with the work of the Spirit? Exactly what does it mean when we give in the name of Christ?

There is no doubt that Stewardship is holy ground. Engaging stewardship is a sacred ground upon which many people and pastors fear to tread, this one included. Council has approached no fewer than 3 people and no one wanted to touch it. But that doesn't mean it is not important. It is easy to think that when we speak of stewardship, the message can be shortened to an understanding of offerings and contributions, shorthand for who gives what and who does not, a message only heard when the coffers are low. It seems ill advised to have a money talk in the church, where there is much tenderness to this. Money is the number one issue of conflict in marriage; yet somehow we feel that we can avoid that same conflict of scarcity in the church? It

is easy to feel that we give of what we have to the organizations that we believe in is our way of merely fulfilling our responsibility to that organization, paying our dues to pay the bill for services rendered. Thinking about it this way, there are enumerable times in which I quite simply have dropped the ball, failed to fulfill the demands of a tithe or what ever measure we are given for proper contribution to the larger whole. And our scripture passage would seem to be ominous in the least: Give, or you die—it is just that simple.

But I think this is a wrongheaded shorthand. Stewardship—true stewardship—has a far more to do with who we are as people and how we relate to that which we are given than it does with our resources or lack there of. But that is a lacking understanding of the issue. Stewardship, derived from the position given responsibility for the property and resources of a person, somewhat akin to a professional power of attorney, involves an inclusive understanding of all the resources we have at our disposal and how we manage those resources. When we talk about personal stewardship in the church context, we are speaking of how we manage all that we are given from God; time, talent, money, environment, relationships, those things that are the building blocks for who and what we are and that sustain us for long term growth and health as persons. When we look at stewardship from a more complete view, a new understanding, we can get away from the temptation of thinking of those resources that we are given are ours and ours alone. In short—it is bigger than us. It is how we encounter the goodness and mercy of God that follow us all the days of our lives, no matter how much that amounts to or how much we have to manage. We all are given a full breadth of resources—we are all invited to use those resources in the way that the Spirit directs. That is what True stewardship invites us to and challenges us with time and again.

Our scripture—a Pentecost story as the church forms and grows-- leads us into the model that is most often held up as the leading ideal of how resources and the church should be handled. In Acts, we are given an account of how the birthing church conducted itself most notably in the area of sharing, coming together for the common good, laying all of their resources at the feet of the church leaders to be redistributed to their brothers and sisters in faith. Here, it would seem, were people who got it, who gave freely and without constraint, whose experience of the gospel compelled them to give all of themselves, even offering up the very

ground upon which they lived as a gift for the furtherance of the work of the congregation. To be sure, this model has been exercised in any number of ways throughout the history of the church, either lauded as the true model for life in Christ, or dismissed as impractical idealism of another time and another era; either position has its own background. The church of Acts, we reason, was one of grace and understanding, one in which full understanding and full sharing could take place. We live in a different time and a different place, and we give what we can, but we have our reasons for holding onto what we have.

I am not here this morning to necessarily advocate that we should go and do likewise here with Jubilee. It would be fascinating, but a bit beyond us. Actually, I raise this scripture for the passage that follow directly after this as much as the passage itself. If we read on through the next eleven or so verses of chapter five, we have one of those stories that I would wager dollars to doughnuts was not exactly Sunday school fare in your growing up years. This is a story that many of us would just as soon have preferred had it been lost along the way to the modern Bible of today. We are given the example of Barnabas (whose very name, Luke helpful points, out mean encouragement) who sells a field and gives the entirety of the proceeds to the church for distribution. However, as we read on, we are given Ananias and his wife who sell their property and give the proceeds to the church, but retain some of the profits for themselves, and represent that what they gave was the full sum of their sale. Peter and John perceive this and call them to account for their deception at which time they fall over dead. Not exactly what we want to think about when we think of a new, loving, caring church ruled over by and understanding and gracious God and Christ, let alone an active Holy Spirit. This story leaves a distinct aftertaste of give all you have or die trying—not exactly the message I am hoping to draw from this text. Please, allow me to be absolutely clear: this is not what I am saying here that we must do stewardship and give or we should die.

What the entirety of this story does give is an interesting study in the motivation of giving from the early church. Surely, this reality of some persons having a great deal, and some not so much has been with the church from the beginning of time, and will continue to be an issue of life as we go forward. The contrast that is being drawn here, I submit, is not one of Barnabas good, Annaisas and wife bad (though if you are wondering it is worth noting that Ananais means

YHWH has been gracious—perhaps a commentary there). The challenge of this story I contend is to draw us again to why we give, why we come together to do as a body what we cannot accomplish on our own.

The reason we give is the reason of the Spirit: we are enabled by the gift of God to see beyond ourselves to the greater whole. We give our monies, yes, but even more so our talents, times, resources, and abilities. This is only possible because the Spirit dwells within us and supplies what we need, even beyond what we need. We give to declare that worship and work are not separate acts, but are merged as one reality, integrating the provision of God into all aspects of our lives. When we give of our time, talent, resources, and relationships we are recognizing that we have been led to green grass and still waters by the Spirit of the Living God, and want to make it possible for others to do the same. By giving of what we have been given, we recognize the giver, and declare in our own way that it is the Lord that shepherds us all that provides for us, that it is YHWH God who supplies what we need, and that it is in the abundance that we have been given that we are called to give. We are called to give and to work as a church body even in the dangerous waters of money politics exactly because we are called to be stewards of ALL of our lives together, not just in the easy stuff but the hard as well. We are called to come to the table to give from all the resources that we have, wherever we find them, not to pay some non-existent bill of sale, but from the abundant hand of the most high. We maintain this holy habit to remind us that our stuff is not just stuff, but is also the workings of God in the world.

This is but scratching the surface of the full meaning of stewardship in the Christian life. We are called to be stewards not out of what we owe, or what we might receive from the giving, but out of a sense of embodying the work of God that continues for each one of us, the work of the Spirit, providing what we need, sustaining our faith, and calling us to rest in the provision of the all encompassing and providing God. May we each come to know the true joy of giving as we come to know the full importance of our call to be stewards in the world. Amen.