

## God's Call to Christian Stewardship

Sermon preached at the Church of St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA

by The Rev. Thomas C. Pumphrey, September 18, 2016

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (year C): Luke 16: 1-13

*Luke 16:1-13 (NRSV) Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.' Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.' And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes. "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."*

I heard a brief story once about three men who were stone cutters. All three men were working on the same building project. When one was asked, "What are you doing?" he replied gloomily "I'm hammering at this rock." He hated the torment and drudgery of his job. When the second was asked what he was doing, he replied "I'm shaping this stone." He cared about his work and craftsmanship. The third was also asked "what are you doing?" and he paused from his work, with hammer and chisel in hand, not taking his eyes from the half-carved block of stone. He replied "I'm building a cathedral!"

The first gave begrudgingly the minimum for his task, and the second gave a healthy portion of his attention to his work. But the third could see the joy of what he was given along with the others, and he gave all of himself to his part in the building of a great work of art. His co-workers thought he was crazy, but he knew he was incredibly blessed. Living life like the third stone cutter is both a tremendous joy and a holy calling. This is the life of Christian Stewardship to which Jesus calls us. God calls us to crazy generosity; God gives us crazy generosity.

I've always enjoyed the story of the stonecutters because of how it displays the conversion that happens when we embrace Christian Stewardship. Christian Stewardship is a concept often quoted for the purposes of fundraising, and indeed generosity with money is an important part of stewardship. True Christian Stewardship, however, begins with a change of heart and a change in perspective. Christian Stewardship involves the joy of discovering our part in the astounding gifts that God has entrusted to our care.

Today's Gospel reading is a weird stewardship parable. Jesus' parables very often shake us up in order to challenge the wisdom of the world with the wisdom of God. But this one seems particularly strange. How could Jesus suggest that this person who seems to be cheating his boss

be considered praiseworthy? Well, this is a complicated parable, for sure, but the parable and the way Jesus uses it says a lot about Christian Stewardship and crazy generosity. I think Jesus uses a bit of sarcasm here toward those who put their trust and their hopes & dreams in wealth, assuming that it will be gone someday.

In this case, we have a manager—a steward—someone who is in charge of another person’s property. This steward’s master is angry because the steward has squandered the master’s property. But when the steward partially forgives some of the master’s debts, the master commends his steward. Why would the master commend this kind of “wastefulness” when he was upset earlier with the steward squandering property? Perhaps there is a difference between *squandering* wealth and *being astonishingly generous* with wealth.

Jesus does not advocate dishonesty—Jesus does advocate generosity. We can squander our resources on ourselves and our fancies, or we can be generous—even with the wealth of this world. Jesus seems to say “If dishonest people know how to be generous, surely you who desire righteousness can be generous.” We can be generous even with the treasures not from heaven. But how can that be? There never seems to be enough money or time or energy for ourselves—how could we give more?

Jesus seems to mysteriously shift gears in the parable, and there is a reason he does so. Jesus caps his parable with another backhanded statement: “*If you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?*” It’s as if Jesus is saying that our wealth does not belong to us, no matter how we try to hoard it. It’s as if Jesus is saying that what we think of as ours—even our very lives—do not belong to us, but that they are in the hands of another to give to us.

And there is the insight of stewardship—and the source of our joy. For stewardship is about the reality that everything that we otherwise call “ours” actually belongs to God—our resources, our time, our responsibilities, our relationships—everything is a gift from God *given to us to tend as his stewards*. Christian stewardship is the response to the gift of new life that God gives to us freely. God asks us to see all that we have as belonging to him. But in that surrender, God gives to us more abundantly than we can possibly imagine!

God gives generously to the just and the unjust. We all have our lives and our time and our unique abilities. God welcomes to the cathedral both the joyful stonecutter and the bitter and indifferent stonecutters as well. That’s crazy— isn’t it? But God gives us crazy generosity. So how will we respond? Can we be as generous in return?

For instance, I often encourage people to devote themselves to worship and study and ministry in the church each week. Some people think that’s crazy—three hours a week they say—impossible! And yet the busy working people who devote that and much more time and energy for their relationship with God feel that God is the one who is generous to them.

Another discipline of generosity is tithing—giving away a tenth of one’s earnings. For some reason we see *that* generosity commonly coming from people of modest means—from gardeners and bus drivers, teachers and cooks. That may sound crazy to those of us who are more fortunate, but not to them.

A friend of mine named Peter was once a struggling musician in New York City, a rather expensive place to live. He had a hard time simply coming up with the rent and each week’s expenses. So he figured that he would give to the church whatever was left over from the week, yet he never had anything left over. Then he began to give money away first, and strangely enough, he had money left over at the end of the week! I’m not recommending this as an investment strategy, but I share this because of the joy that Peter discovered. He found that God could make his generosity possible. Even in his meager circumstances, he became an advocate for tithing and embracing stewardship in all his resources. He felt God bless his life and it changed the way he thought about his time and money and friends and fellow singers. He saw with new eyes how much God had given him, and the old life of anxious living became a life of joy and gratitude and yes, crazy generosity.

He gave up the torment and drudgery of trying to serve two masters. He saw more than his duty in front of him. He saw the cathedral that God was building in his life, and all around him! And he gave his whole life into sharing that joy!

Stewardship is about what we give away, and about what we keep, about what we save and what we spend, about how we tend the life and lives given into our care—our selves, our families, our friends and even the strangers that cross our paths. For some, this may sound like drudgery—like that first stone cutter. For others, they may take it on as a matter of duty given with a piece of their lives—like the second stone cutter. But God calls us to be like the third stone cutter—the crazy one who gave all of himself to the joy of that cathedral. God calls us to give him all of who we are, not because of what we can build for ourselves, but for the cathedral that God wants to build in us.

The more of our lives we give into God’s care, the more of our lives God can bless.

This language of generosity and building cathedrals is not just for capital campaigns and pledge drives. The joy of stewardship is the joy of hearts transformed by the love of God in Jesus Christ. The cathedral that God is building in us is Growing Disciples of Jesus Christ. Christian Stewardship is a path toward deeper discipleship, deeper trust in God, deeper commitment to God, and a greater sense of God’s abundance in our lives.

God calls us to enjoy the blessings he has in store for us as we devote more of our lives to him through stewardship. Come join that third stone cutter and enjoy the crazy generosity of God!