

Pentecost 23, Proper 28
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

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The Kingdom of Abundance

Stewardship is all that we are and all that we have after we say, "I believe." I want you to get a prayer book out for a moment and open it to p. 427. Look at the ring vows at the bottom of the page. Read it with me.

(N,) I give you this ring as a symbol of my vow, and with all that I have and with all that I am, I honor you, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Do you see the parallel language between this piece and the initial thing I said? It is not without reason. Marriage is a practice in stewardship. It is a mutual self-giving, an intimate relationship with a common purpose. It is small wonder that St. Paul uses the language of marriage to describe our relationship with God—God and us, in an intimate, self-giving relationship, with a common purpose. Have you ever heard a love-struck couple say, "We're just going to live on love"? Yes, it's unrealistic and irresponsible, but it reflects something very profound. When you wed you don't think about how little you have. You think about how much you have. And so we could read the same vows as a prayer:

Dear God, I give you my gift as a symbol of my vow. And with all that I am, and all that I have, I honor you.

Stewardship is nothing more than the commitment we have to the cause of Christ in the world, and it's not about how little you have, but how incredibly much you have!

There are four questions people ask today:. They are:

1. What is the meaning of my life? Why am I here? What task am I to perform in the context of the world? What great destiny is mine? What's it all about in the end?
2. What value do I have? What contribution can I make? What value do I have if I cannot or do not make a contribution? What will be missed when I am not here?
3. Am I worthy of love? Is there someone or something out there to which I can be intrinsically important? Will it be painful to anyone when I am gone? Do I make a difference to someone?

4. Do have a family, a community to which I belong? Am I alone? Or are there others who accompany me in life? Is there someone who will bear witness to my life?

The world gives answers to each of these questions. They go like this:

1. The meaning of life is to make money so I can buy bigger and better toys.
2. The value I have is precisely the value of my bank account, my investments, and the taxes I pay.
3. I am worthy of love only if I take part in the economic machinery of the world,
4. And I have a community of those who spend as I do.

But underlying all of these statements is a pernicious assumption. They all depend on me spending more and more money. They depend on me wanting what I do not yet have more than what I do. They derive their energy from my lack, from what I do not have, from what I cannot do, from the gap between desire and condition. They work on a hermeneutic of scarcity, which yields the magnificent self-contradiction, that in one of the richest nations of the world we are not satisfied with what we have! Though rich, we feel poor. And therein is the lie. The world does not tell us the truth. It tells us what it needs to, to keep the machinery going.

But there are another set of answers. The wisdom is found in many traditions, but they are no stranger to Jesus' teaching.

1. The richest thing one has in life is oneself as a gift of God.
2. To give oneself is the richest gift possible, an inexhaustible storehouse of goodness.
3. A price cannot be put on the value of a person, so worthiness is not the question, existence is.
4. Therefore, instead of scarcity, the Kingdom of God works on an assumption of abundance. All those who seek to live in this kingdom are our loving, generous community in which each one has a part.

Jesus gets at that truth in the parable he tells us today. A king gives enormously large chunks of money to his servants to work with while he is away. A talent was the weight of water that filled a Greek amphora. The Roman talent of Jesus' day was about 71 pounds. If you multiply that by the price of gold today you get:

$71 \times 16 \times \$1220$ (an ounce of gold today) = \$1,385,920

Already you see just what kind of abundance we're talking about. The first guy got almost \$14M. The second guy got half that, just shy of \$7M. And the third guy got \$1.4M

The first two took their money, plunged into the craziness of the first century stock market, and doubled their money, not really hard to do, as I understand, though I'm a financial peasant when it comes to these things.

What shorted the third guy was not the King. it was his own assumption of scarcity. If you just invest it at 5% you're going to earn a solid \$70G a year. But out of his fear he couldn't even do that. He buried his money. Better to hoard what I have lest I lose it all, than to trust, to risk, to offer and receive. You know how much interest dollar bills earn sitting in a mattress somewhere? Zilch, Zero, Nada!

If the Church is the Community of the Kingdom of God then it is a community of abundance. We live that out in three ways:

We are a Eucharistic community, a community of thanksgiving. We are grateful to one another. We try to recognize and acknowledge the gift of ministry by everyone. You need to know that your ministries ARE making a difference. We are grateful to God, for none of us has to be here, yet we are. None of this whole Church as to be here, but it is. Nothing at all has to be here, yet out of the abundance of the love of God, everything exists that exists. So perhaps you can think of your pledge cards as "Thank you" cards to God and to the parish.

We are an empowering community. Our greatest resource is not the offering, but the people in the pews. It is you all that make this church what it is. It is the employment of your gifts, talents and riches that enable us to do the ministries in this place that we do. And that is fitting. No one ever gets baptized without getting a job. Each person has a role to play. Therefore I encourage EVERYONE to fill out a pledge card, even (and maybe especially) children. We have children's pledge cards for you, because you can make a difference, too!

So from now on we're not going to use the word, "volunteer," for you are not just volunteers. What you do for the parish and for the world is a ministry. By it you collaborate with God in the redemption of the world. God needs you. God wants you. We need to be honest and call it what it is.

We are an engaged community. Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus is not the king of the world of scarcity, but rather the kingdom of heaven and all its abundance. How we minister will tell the world what we believe about that kingdom. If we truly believe that Jesus is the king of the Kingdom of Heaven, then our ministries must be ministries of abundance, sharing with outrageous generosity the talents with which we have been entrusted.

One could say that we, in a sense, eternal renters. When a renter checks out of a rented building he or she takes nothing with them but what they came with. When we check out of this earthly life we take nothing with us except what we brought, which is our souls. Instead we focus our energies and our resources on the cause of the Kingdom, confident that provision enough will be made for our needs, because we know that the Kingdom is one of abundance!

Stewardship is nothing more and nothing less than the commitment we have to the cause of Christ in the world.