

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Stewardship – A Way of Life: Week 1
October 4, 2020
Philippians 3:4b-14

“Stewardship in the Home”

It all comes down to what happens at home. The lessons we learn in life, the values we have, what is important to us, the meaning and application of faith, how we treat others – it all has its roots and origins in the home and family. The primary foundation of any society is the home. This is why our 4-part fall stewardship series, “Stewardship – A Way of Life,” begins with stewardship in the home. Over the weeks to come, we will explore what stewardship looks like in concentric circles from home and family (Week #1 – October 4) to congregation (Week #2 – October 11) to community (Week #3 – October 18) and to the world (Week #4 – October 25). COVID-19 has changed many things this year – how we live, how we work, how we function in daily life. Everyone’s life situation is very different from what it was a year ago. And yet, managing God’s gifts entrusted to our care remains an important part of our life in Christ. How do we understand this at this very unusual time? Based on today’s Epistle lesson from Paul the apostle’s letter to the Philippians, today’s sermon is entitled “Stewardship in the Home.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

The mission statement of St. John’s Lutheran Church is this:

We gather around the cross, formed and fueled by God's grace, and are sent into the world to invite all people to a life transformed by Jesus Christ.

Accompanying this mission statement are four vision elements: Gather, Disciple, Manage, and Invite. It is the third vision element – Manage – that speaks to what Christian stewardship is about. This is the description of what this Manage vision element looks like:

We see our time, our possessions, and our selves, not as things we own, but as that which belongs to God. Our calling is to help each believer grow in a life-style and world-view that are Christ-like, honoring the Lord with our whole life. We joyfully return to God everything He has put into our hands - all that we are and have. We strive to help one another discover our unique and God-given talents, using these in ways that will be a blessing to people inside and outside our congregation.

In today’s Epistle lesson, Paul is writing to believers in the city of Philippi, in what is today the nation of Greece. Here, Paul lifts up his own background and family life: **“circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless”** (Philippians 3:5-6). He had a very impressive pedigree. But after his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-22), Paul does a 180 degree turn-around. Suddenly, all of these things recede into the background. They really don’t matter like they used to, as he writes: **“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ”** (Philippians 3:7-9a). Paul’s understanding of life and his stewardship of life takes on a whole new meaning in Christ.

What does stewardship in your home mean to you? What does this look like? Maybe you are struggling with loneliness and isolation due to COVID-19 restrictions. Maybe tensions are high as you juggle working from home and online school for your children. Maybe you are COVID-weary and Zoomed out; just feeling worn down and depleted because of what's been going on – or not going on – these last six months. Our own situation is different from Paul the apostle. We haven't had that life-altering encounter with the risen Lord Jesus Christ that pushes us into a totally new direction in life. Or have we? The truth is that the risen Lord Jesus Christ does meet us along life's road. He comes to us just as surely as he did to Paul – maybe not in such a direct and dramatic fashion, but he comes nonetheless. The risen Lord Jesus Christ comes to meet us in our weariness and our struggles through his life-giving Word, the holy Scriptures. That written Word makes known to us the living Word, the Word-made-flesh, who was born and lived, suffered and died, lives and reigns for you and me. The risen Lord Jesus Christ comes to us also in those places where he has promised to be found, where there is mercy and grace to help in time of need: the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper. In Word and Sacrament, Jesus comes to meet us in all our need to forgive, strengthen, and bless his children to serve as his witnesses in the world.

One of the direct impacts of COVID-19 is that we are spending a lot more time at home. Initially, this all may have felt like a break from our usual schedule; it was different and maybe we welcomed this. But now we probably find this confining and restricting. It's easy to take out our frustrations on those who are closest to us – members of our own family. One of the greatest gifts that we can give to those around us, especially in our own home, is the gift of listening. Hearing is not the same as listening. Most people listen passively, because they consider speaking to be the active component of communication. That is because we confuse listening with hearing. When you walk through a mall or into a restaurant, we often hear music playing in the background. We are aware that it's there, but we really don't pay attention to it. Contrast that with the experience of attending a concert and music you love. In the first case you were hearing, in the second you were listening. Listening is active participation; it requires our full attention. It means putting the phone down. It means turning off the TV and closing the laptop. It means giving full concentration to listening to the other person. We know when we've been listened to, and we know when we've not been listened to. To listen and listen well to our loved ones is real-time stewardship in the home. To be listened to without interruption or anything that feels like judgment is to bless the other person.

One other thought about stewardship in the home, and that is contentment, something which the tenants in the vineyard in today's Gospel lesson (Matthew 21:33-46) did not enjoy. I have not been making calls and home visits like I did pre-COVID. I've missed this, and have started to reclaim this, as people are willing to have me come into their homes. Recently, I visited our congregation's oldest member, who is 102 years old. After coming into her home and sitting down, I asked how she was doing. I will remember her response as long as I live. She said, "I am content." Like many older people, she lives with many aches and pains. Like many older people, she's also been very isolated over the last six months. And yet, by the grace of God, she was able to say, "I am content." What an incredible witness to all of us! This points us to Paul's closing words in the Epistle lesson: **"But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus"** (Philippians 3:13b-14). The risen Lord Jesus Christ calls each one of us to the gift of contentment in our life of stewardship. Contentment in God's care and provision for our daily needs will help us then to let go of the past, what lies behind, and press on in faith toward what lies ahead.

It all comes down to what happens at home. May our stewardship of God's gifts in our homes and families strengthen us in our journey of faith toward that glorious goal – the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Amen.