

**The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Stewardship – A Way of Life: Week 3**  
**October 18, 2020**  
**1 Thessalonians 1:1-10**

*“Stewardship in the Community”*

Like most churches, the roots of our congregation are in the community in which we are located. In the mid-1950s, after initially meeting in the living rooms of people’s homes, our congregation began to meet at Franconia Elementary School, still just down the street from where we are today. Franconia Elementary School opened at its doors to our congregation and the first worship service was held there on January 15, 1956. People who were there during those early days shared with me that school personnel really liked St. John’s. Why? Because members of the church left the facilities better than they found it by seeing to it that the floor of the cafeteria received a good scrubbing each week after worship, Sunday School, and Bible class. That’s good stewardship! That is blessing the community around our congregation. Based on the Epistle lesson from 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10, we look especially at the Scripture memory verse for this week: **“We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ”** (1 Thessalonians 1:2-3). The theme before us today is: “Stewardship in the Community.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

“Stewardship – A Way of Life” is our theme for this month-long emphasis during October. So far, we have looked at stewardship in the home and with family, and stewardship in the congregation. Think of these as concentric rings that go out further and further: from home and family to congregation to community, and finally to the world. “Stewardship in the World” will be our theme next weekend as we celebrate Reformation Sunday and receive estimate-of-giving commitments for ministry in 2021. But before we get to the world, there is the community in which we live. Paul the apostle’s first letter to the Thessalonians is believed by many to be his earliest letter, perhaps as early as 51 A.D. His message to the church was to encourage new believers in their faith, exhorting them to godly living, and assuring them about fellow believers who had died, all the while defending the integrity of his ministry as an apostle. These early believers lived in the city of Thessalonica, which was the capital of the province of Macedonia in the Roman Empire. Ancient Thessalonica is present-day Thessaloniki, in the nation of Greece. This was a large city, situated on important trade routes. That’s the community in which Thessalonian believers lived. What about the community in which we live?

I want to speak about Stewardship in the Community under three headings from Paul’s words in the Epistle lesson: 1) “your work of faith”; 2) “your labor of love”; and 3) “your steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ,” all from the Scripture memory verse. First, “your work of faith.” For the child of God, doing good in the community is more than just addressing the hurts and hopes of whatever the needs in the community may be. It’s more than providing immediate help, however pressing that may be. For the child of God, blessing the community in which we live becomes a work of faith because it begins with faith. It begins with the saving truth that God in Christ has stepped into our broken world, into our hurting communities and lives, to address our deepest need. That deepest need is not jobs or housing or good schools or affordable child care. Our deepest need is to reverse the curse; to break the power of the downward, deathward spiral of sin that separates us from God and from one another. Our deepest need is for a restored and right relationship with God, something which we ourselves cannot and could never do. Enter Christ Jesus, Son of God, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, who by his life of full obedience to all of God’s commands has fulfilled all righteousness for us, and who by his sacrificial death upon the cross has paid the penalty of our sin and disobedience. When by the power of the Holy Spirit we know God as our loving Father through the cleansing blood of Jesus, we are moved to works of

faith. Seeking to do good in our community by blessing the people of our community means that there is something deeper at work here. It is more than just the personal satisfaction we may have of feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, helping the poor, advocating for the least among us. As works of faith that flow from faith in Jesus, all of these things become vehicles to show forth the love of Jesus, pointing others to him through our words and actions. May the Lord Jesus Christ be honored by our works of faith, and may our community, especially neighbors in need, be blessed through these works of faith.

Second, Paul speaks of “your labor of love.” Anyone who has ever devoted themselves to a special project, giving time and energy to this, knows what this looks like. You give of yourself and it becomes your labor of love. In the stewardship video that will be coming out this week, we will hear of three such labors of love: our Early Childhood Education Center, our English as a Second Language classes, and our support of Koinonia, the Franconia-Kingstowne community service agency. There are many, many individuals with these three ministries alone who have devoted untold hours, and through them, have blessed untold lives in the community, all in the Name of Jesus. This side of heaven, we will likely never know the full impact of what this means, but the Lord knows. Before too long, we will once again be watching holiday movies at home. One of my favorites is “It’s a Wonderful Life,” which tells the story of George Bailey who despaired that his own life, his labor of love, amounted to nothing. But he is allowed to see how many lives his own life touched, and what those lives would have looked like without him and his labor of love. The effects of the pandemic may have changed patterns of daily life, but there is still much good that we can do in the community in Jesus’ Name, if not in person, then virtually. What is your labor of love? What is it that you are passionate about? And how will this stewardship of your time, your talents, and your treasure not only bless the community, but give glory to our Lord?

Third, Paul speaks of “your steadfastness of hope.” Those two words, “steadfastness” and “hope” are so important for us to hold onto in our journey of faith. To be sure, there is a weariness that has set in with impact from COVID-19. In fact, in a recent webinar that I participated in on this, the presenter said that in terms of our collective reaction to COVID-19, we have moved from response to weariness to anger. Is that true? And if so, how do we turn this around into steadfastness of hope? We are called to be careful, but not fearful. As we look ahead to Thanksgiving, Advent, and Christmas, it goes without saying that these will look very different this year, and we may grieve this. But here is a word of encouragement for us. We are not alone. The Lord Jesus who loves us and laid down his life for us, promises that he will never leave us nor forsake us. Because of this, we are able, with God’s gracious help, to persevere, to carry on, to not give up. Note here that the word hope is a noun, not a verb. That’s important. We hope for many things, but to *have* hope – now that is different. Our hope is in our risen, reigning, and returning Lord Jesus Christ. He has given us eternal hope and lasting joy that transcends all of the disappointments and losses in this life. And so we press on in steadfastness of hope, day by day, looking not only to our own needs but to the needs of others, including those in our community.

The psalm appointed for worship this weekend is Psalm 96, which begins with these words: **“Oh sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth! Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples!”** (Psalm 96:1-3). What was true when these words were first written are still true today. We are called to declare the glory of God among the nations, and his marvelous works among all the peoples. In a very real way, our lives become a living sermon to those around us. As God has loved us and done good to us, not sparing even the life of his only Son for us, so we are to love and do good to others. May the Lord uphold and strengthen us in our work of faith, our labor of love, and our steadfastness of hope as we exercise wise and faithful stewardship in the community, to the glory of God and for the good of all. Amen.