

Sermon by Lex Breckinridge – Oct.20, 2019

Pentecost

I want to invite us into a Thought experiment. I'm going to say a word, and you are going to immediately be aware of the first word that springs to your mind. In response. For example, if I said "Eucharist", the first word that comes to mind might be "Bread" or it might be "wine". Not a phrase or a sentence. One Word. Don't edit yourself. There's no right or wrong answer. Just one word. OK. Here's the word. Feel free to say it out loud or just hold it in your head.

"Stewardship"

If the first word that came to your mind and crossed your screen was "money", well, you're not alone. That's what many of us think about as soon as we hear the word "Stewardship", particularly in the church context; Money. And particularly at this time of the year, the time when many churches, including St. Thomas, have their Fall fundraising campaign which is referred to as "The Stewardship Campaign".

Now, let me be very clear. This time of focused fundraising is really important for our lives here. Your pledge, my pledge, allows the vestry and staff to be responsible managers – which means responsible stewards- and I'll say more about that in a minute -of the resources with which we have been entrusted. Yes, there are bills to pay. We need to maintain this beautiful space. We are anxiously awaiting our return to our church home. And it's going to be beautiful!

We are hoping to add a ½ time new communication specialist to the staff to facilitate the transparent flow of information which we all want; we want to continue to support and grow our amazing music program which Doug so ably leads. We want to support and grow our outreach ministries both here inside the walls and outside our halls. And you have called what I believe is a truly remarkable staff to serve

the Lord Jesus and you and the community. They're committed to Christ and to you, that's for sure. And they haven't had a COLA in three years. We urgently need to fix that.

So, yes, fundraising is important for all of us. But I'm here to tell you this morning that fundraising is not primarily what the term "stewardship[" is about. Stewardship is about a whole lot more. To illustrate what I'm talking about I'm going to tell you a story that Jesus told his friends in Mark's gospel.

He Said:

"Watch out for the religion scholars. They love to walk around in academic gowns, preening in the radiance of public flattery, basking in prominent positions, sitting at the head table at every church function. And all the time they are exploiting the weak and helpless. The longer their prayers, the worse they get. But they'll pay for it in the end."

41-44 Sitting across from the offering box, he was observing how the crowd tossed money in for the collection. Many of the rich were making large contributions. One poor widow came up and put in two small coins – a measly two cents. Jesus called his disciples over and said, "The truth is that this poor widow gave more to the collection plate than all the others put together. All the others gave what they'll never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn't afford – she gave her all."

"She gave her all".

That's right. There's no getting around it. Not a percentage. Not a tithe. Everything. Her whole life. That's what we hear Jesus holding up to his disciples this morning as an example. It seems this widow's two small coins , -two cents- were worth more than the big money that others were putting into the Temple treasury. They weren't putting in everything. She was.

I can't begin to imagine how many thousands of stewardship sermons have been preached on this text. You've heard them. You've

heard them. I'll bet more than once. Me Too. I've preached them! But you know what? Most of those stewardship sermons, including the ones I've preached on this text, miss the point. As soon as we try to analogize the widow giving all that she had to the Temple, with our giving to the Church, we've missed the point. Because inevitably we say something like, "well, if she gave everything , I guess I ought to give just a little bit more."

And so when the widow gets used as simply an example of faithful giving, an example, by the way, we'll never live up to – it becomes easy to ignore what's really going on here. If we think of our stewardship as being primarily about giving our money – whether to the church or other worthy organizations – our focus is too narrow. In fact, we fundamentally misunderstand who we are and who God is calling us to be. Because a steward isn't an owner. A steward is a manager. That's the literal meaning of steward. Manager. A manager acting on behalf of an owner. And the owner of course is God. God from whom all blessings flow. The owner of all that was or is or is to come, is not me. The resources of my household aren't mine in any permanent sense. They are just passing through.

I'm 67. And that's hard for me to believe since I was 35 just last month. And as I continue on this inexorable journey through life to the closing hymn – if you know what I mean – I realize more and more the truth that I don't own anything in any permanent sense of that term. I'll leave the stage the same way I entered. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. It's all passing away as Paul observed to the Corinthians.

Every year – including this year – when Zonnie and I sit down to complete our pledge card, we wind up by talking about our priorities. And you know, we occasionally spring a couple of small leaks in our little household boat. And so these conversations about priorities help us to be better managers of our whole lives. I mean, I want to be a better manager of me.

And so the question, “How much shall we give to St. Thomas this year?” is really the wrong question. That’s a question an owner would ask, not a steward. Think about it. If you’ve given all your money to a financial advisor to manage, wouldn’t you be surprised if she said, I’m going to manage 20% or 5% or 10% of this for you and then I think I’ll go ahead and keep the rest for myself.” I’d be out of that office pretty quick. No, you would expect your advisor to manage all of your resources in your interest. So it is with God. I didn’t hear Jesus say, “Love God with all your heart, mind, and strength, and with 2% of your income.” Not at all. That’s an owner’s way of looking at things. An owner chooses to give or not. That’s not a choice the steward has.

In fact, I would go so far as to say that this is the ultimate question in our lives. How have we managed this gift from God? I mean our very lives? Well or poorly? What kind of steward of my life am I? It’s an accounting I have to give every day. And I really do believe that one day it’s an accounting I will make with the real owner of my life, the one whom I’m called to love with all my heart, mind and strength. Now I don’t dread that accounting because I know that the owner of my life is both just and merciful. But I tell you what. I sure do want to get it right.

And that’s where this story of the widow’s two cents comes in. The widow offered all that she had and all that she was. 100% We are called to manage all our assets in the interest of God – spiritual, emotional, physical, intellectual, professional, and yes, financial, in the interest of God. 100%.

It’s way beyond the annual 6 weeks begathon in the Fall. It’s about growing and strengthening this life-giving and life-changing community we are all blessed to be part of. We aren’t isolated individuals living in our own little cabins rationing out our selves and our resources. We are a Christian community, a group of people bound together with a common vision of living in joyful hope of the Resurrection. That resurrected life in Christ is best experienced here and now – in community. In **this** community.

Don't you want to be a good steward of your whole life? A faithful Manager of all that God has blessed you with? I'm talking about life and love and family and friends and community. It's really life-changing. It's transformative. Engagement. Commitment. Gratitude. Care for Creation. Those are the markers of our adventure in Stewardship.

Imagine that Jesus has just told you the story of the widow who put in all that she had. And now he turns to you and says, "What will you put in? What will I put in? if my answer isn't "Everything , "well I have some work to do on loving and serving with all my heart, mind and strength. Being a faithful manager, a committed manager of the gifts of life and love. Living that out in this community of followers of Jesus

And one tangible, concrete sign of your commitment to be a faithful manager is your pledge card, your Commitment card. It's a sign of my commitment and your commitment to be a follower of Jesus. And that's why it's really important you complete this card. This card tells you that you are committed to following Jesus. It's just a different feeling than simply making a contribution in the offering plate on those Sundays you come to church. It's the satisfaction of being truly committed.

One day we will all be called to make an accounting. In fact, we're really called to account every day. And I truly believe that this accounting isn't about numbers. It's about commitment. It's about faith. It's about surrender. How have I used the ultimate resource- my very life – that has been entrusted to me? Have I used it purposefully in love and service? Or have I used it selfishly to gratify my ego and my desires? I struggle to answer that accounting every day. Some days I do better than others. But I do believe that it's the struggle itself that counts. It's the intention that counts. It's the commitment that counts. It's the pledge of my whole life to the owner of my life. 100%. Amen