

What Stewardship Means to Me?

Dear Friends in Christ:

My pulpit assignment today is to bring to close the four week sermon series entitled, “*What Stewardship means to me.*” Most likely, you are ready for this series to come to a close, and, in all honesty, I was a tad reluctant about today’s message, telling Pastor Lineberger that his sermon last week was going to be a hard act to follow! But the theme is “*what stewardship means to me.*” I have been richly blessed by each of the previous sermons, each pastor bringing their own unique style and story, wit and wisdom, but today it’s personal to me...it has to be... what stewardship means “*to me!*”

Now, I’ve preached and taught Christian stewardship many times here at Hope, but today’s message is not designed to simply be a theological treatise on giving...*though it could be.* Today’s sermon is not a Bible study on tithes and offerings, time, talent and treasure...*though it could be.* No, my goal is to share personally *what stewardship means to me*, thus I have to get personal, going all the way back to childhood when times were tough for my family, my parents struggling year after year to simply make ends meet. My mother and father faced numerous health problems, my Dad hospitalized at the VA for months at a time, fighting on-going medical and personal issues that prevented him from working consistently.

So, we were one of the families that received the Thanksgiving baskets of food from our church. We were in

need and others cared; we received because someone else freely gave. *That's stewardship to me.* In the winter, my Dad's union from the plant where he worked delivered new warm coats and boots, or gave my mother a voucher to go purchase what was needed. At Christmas, we were the kids, my brother, sister and I, who benefited from the "angel tree," receiving wrapped packages and presents beneath ours. Someone freely gave and we received, *that's stewardship to me!*

My growing up years and future vocation as a Pastor, you see, were highly influenced by a church and community, family and friends who modeled caring and giving. It was never simply about money or possessions, because even though there was a lot we lacked, we always had everything needed...because someone freely gave and we received! *That's stewardship to me!* Stewardship is always personal, being genuinely and generously loved by someone else, a response to the Biblical principle: "*We love, because God first loved us!*" (1 John 4:19)

In retrospect, I realize how God was shaping my own life, growing me up to value first and foremost, gratefulness, hard work, kindness, care and respect for others; inspiring me to want to "give" from "blessings" received. At times, life wasn't so good, some memories not so great, but God was working His good in all things...all the time! *That's what stewardship means to me!* It is all about trust; it's living every day with eyes of faith; it's an awareness of blessing that sparks an attitude of gratitude, which personally propels and compels God's children to love, to give and to serve! It's personal...because "*God so loved the world [so loved you and me] that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him might not perish but have everlasting life.*" (John 3:16) God freely gave and we received...*that's stewardship to me!*

Thinking about what God has first given, and that's always the starting point, how then can we not respond with lives that are abounding in grace and love, every good work a testimony to the greater love of God? It is the essence of Christian stewardship, defined theologically as *“the free and joyous activity of the child of God and God's family, the church, in managing all of life and life's resources for God's purposes.”* That's stewardship to me...and yes, it's personal, challenging each one of us to reflect on His love and our response!

One of the great beauties of the Bible, I think, is that it so personal. Take Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, our Epistle Lesson today, as the Apostle writes about the offering that is being received to support the distressed Christians in Jerusalem...people in need. Paul was encouraging generosity, inspiring them to excel in the grace of giving, and he makes it personal and challenging: *“The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.”* (2 Corinthians 9:6) In other words, we are **“blessed to be a blessing”** – a theme that has history here at Hope.

It doesn't matter how many packets of seed we own, or how much stuff we have, but are we personally willing to give and share and help and care; *“loving the Lord our God [first] with all of our hearts and loving neighbor as self!”* (Luke 10:27) Here's the point; we are missing out on something *[you are missing out on something]* when we sow sparingly; only considering our needs first; what makes us happy or feel good; holding on too much to what we have instead of investing in the work of God's kingdom, reaching out to those in need. I am so personally grateful that the seeds of kindness and care from church and community touched the life of my family; inspiring,

blessing, and motivating me to personally respond to the love of Christ! *That's stewardship to me!*

Note the next personal point the Apostle makes: "Each one must give as she/he has decided in their heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." (2 Corinthians 9:7) Notice: "*Each one!*" That's personal! "*Not reluctantly or under compulsion!*" Remember, "Christian stewardship is the free and joyous activity of the child of God and God's family, the church" for "God loves a cheerful giver." You know what the Greek New Testament word is for "*cheerful?*" It's "hilaros," from which comes the English "*hilarious*," meaning "*God loves a hilarious giver!*"

Well, I gotta tell you, that sometimes from this vantage point up front, and even when sitting in the pew, it seems like the offerings in church are something less than a cheerful, hilarious moment. Perhaps you're just worn out from the sermon or hate saying goodbye to what you are about to give? Maybe you're like the little girl whose "*mother wanted to teach her about giving, so she gave her daughter a quarter and a dollar for church. She said, 'Put whichever one you want in the offering plate and keep the other for yourself.'* When they were coming out of church, the mother asked her daughter which amount she had given. '*Well,*' said the little girl, '*I was going to give the dollar, but then the man in the pulpit said that we should all be cheerful givers, so I knew I'd be a lot more cheerful if I gave the quarter, so I did.*'" (Bits & Pieces, February 4, 1993, p. 23)

Not your daughter or son right? Not you or me, because cheerful, hilarious giving is always and only a response of faith to His love; it is a heart transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit, inclined toward a life of discipleship and followership of the Christ who gave His all for us on Calvary's Cross! Giving is

not about us...it's about Him! Christian stewardship at Hope has always been linked to our mission to "*proclaim and live the Word and love of Christ,*" perhaps adding today the adverbs: "*cheerfully*" proclaim and "*hilariously*" live! *That's stewardship to me!*

The neat thing about such gratitude it that comes with a personal promise, as Paul writes: "*And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.*" (2 Corinthians 9:8) Christian stewardship, my friends, is not about holding on to what we have, but holding on to Him, trusting that "*God's grace is sufficient in all things...all the time!*" This promise is the Gospel truth that inspires and sustains God's people, and His church! When life is tough, challenges great, relationships broken, circumstances less than ideal, sin and death doing their thing in our lives and world we can hold on to the promise that God is "*with us*" and will see us "*through!*" It's a bold and bodacious faith and trust that is framed by the shadow of a cross and the open door of a dark, dank tomb because Jesus is not there! "*He is risen! He lives!*" He is coming again as "*King of Kings and Lord of Lords! All hail the power of Jesus' Name!*"

What does stewardship mean to me? It's personal...a response to His love, modeled in my life by those who freely gave...and unworthy I received!

Lord, you are more precious than silver,

Lord, you are most costly than gold;

Lord you are more beautiful than diamonds,

And nothing can compare with knowing you!

Now, my friends, it's your chance to give the sermon...to live the sermon. **What's does stewardship mean to you? AMEN**