

Text: Luke 12" 13-34
Title: Stewardship 101

Date: September 20, 2009

We hate talking about stewardship, don't we? Any ideas why? Sure you do- for stewardship campaigns often revolve around some form of guilt- don't they? We hear statistics like if the average couple bought a cup of coffee and muffin daily from Starbucks, they would be giving Starbucks more money than the average family gives to the church. We have no idea if it is true- but it sounds like it might be. Then we start asking ourselves, "How much do I spend on coffee.....?" We all know that we are supposed to be shooting for 10% to give to the Lord, how many of us even touch half of that? So we beat ourselves up with guilt- which of course is the opposite of relying on God's grace. If church was about guilt we might as well just issue the hair shirts at the door.

Besides reacting to stewardship with guilt, we also have fallen into the trap of equating wealth with security and self sufficiency. Jesus runs headlong into these in this morning's passage. At first glance the whole scenario seems odd- Jesus as family court judge? What's the deal? Deuteronomy 21 tells us that if a man has 2 wives, that he cannot disinherit the son of the first wife, but must guarantee 2x the inheritance to the son of the first wife. Makes sense- if the first marriage doesn't work out, why should the children of the first marriage suffer? Makes you wonder what our courts would look like if we adopted something like that. so this guy wants Jesus to intervene. Moses was known to- but Jesus avoids this like a hot potato. The issue for Jesus is not just division but greed. Inheritance is, after all free money- money for which we did not earn but our parents earned. See his problem- this guy gets a gift and he is envious of his brother's gift? See Commandment # 10, do not covet. For Jesus the root cause is greed, which causes us to misuse the blessings that God provides.

So he tells this story, which to his listeners would be absurd. It's not like this guy is a farmer- he is the landowner- for absentee landlords were pretty much the norm by the First Century. If one had a bumper crop, one had obligations to spread the wealth. Make sure that your farmers are taken care of- for many of them earn only enough to feed their families for 10 month out of the year- you pick which ones you want to starve

in. What about the guy's family? While it was true that wealth was seen as a sign of God's blessing- having a family was even more so. So instead of taking care of the people in his life he tears down the 3, (3! What is he doing with 3?!) storage bins.

To add even more weirdness, from a Jewish perspective, this guy tells himself that now that he is set for life, he can "eat, drink and be merry." That is the motto of hedonism- the notion that pleasure is the most important pursuit of humanity. Greeks might talk that way- but not Jews! Remember the Shema, the verse in Deuteronomy 6 that every Jew begins and ends each day with? "Hear O Israel, the Lord is One! You shall love the Lord with All of your heart, and all your soul, and with all of your might" No wonder God calls him a fool when his number is up- for for all practical purposes, our Rich fool was a functioning atheist. Oops.... What the Rich Man should have known was that God provides wealth for the sharing, for the good of the community and to be used in the service of others. Wealth does not bring with it security- wealth brings with it obligation.

Jesus build on this notion that our confusing wealth with security leads to relying on wealth rather than God starting in verse 22. Jesus tells his disciples not to worry about what they eat or what they will wear. The verb we translate as worry is ***merimnao***- it means to be anxious, to obsess, to strive towards. Jesus isn't saying don't be responsible with our finances, just the opposite- to not be controlled by anxiety about the future when we make those decisions. I wish I could tell you that I knew what the future holds. I cannot, the future is within God's domain- not mine. Jesus tells us that by obsessing about our future cannot increase our life span- for that too is in the hands of God.

I grew up in California. I was too young to experience the full on Hippie days of the 60s that equated being countercultural with living on handouts. I came along just in time to see the pendulum swing in the opposite direction- the 70s was the era of the YUPPIE, young urban professional. Silicon valley was the place to be where, since many could not generate the income to buy a house, they sank those dollars into really expensive cars, flashy clothes, etc.. I'm sorry, a 10 year old BMW is still a 10 year old used car. You would have thought the first dot com crash of the 80s would have ended the notion that I am what I drive or what I wear- but no. what was true for the rich fool

was still true- wealth does not bring security- and basing one's status on stuff that can wear out doesn't work too well either.

Jesus offers an alternative, the same one that Moses and all the prophets told the people in their time. Base your wealth and your status on God's priorities- forget about keeping up with the Jones, and everything will fall into place. The poster child for this was King Solomon, who sought first the Lord and his wisdom and as a result his wealth was legendary. But he is known, not for his portfolio, but for his wisdom. The fear of the Lord, Proverbs, which supposedly is written by Solomon, is the beginning of wisdom. The point is clear- put God first and all will fall into place.

Sure we need to save for retirement. Sure we need to figure out how to pay the college tuition bills. Sure we need to take care of our parents. God knows that. God also knows that we were created as beings who derive our greatest satisfaction when we are helping others. God also knows that without Him, there is no self sufficiency. God also knows that when it comes to honor, when it comes to status, that the people we admire the most are those who live their lives in such a way to maximize benefit to the largest amount of people. God knows this, for God is our Creator- and we are created in His image.

Bottom line, stewardship is about who and what we place our trust in. We can be shortsighted and see only these 2 hands- only these 2 hands that I have to use to do all that I know that I should. If I really thought that I would be anxious as all get out. On the other hand if I raise my eyes to the Lord, if I see the vastness of creation, then I realize that life is larger than what these 2 hands can bring to the table. That when I adopt God's priorities then my needs are met- with enough left over to share.

It seems counterintuitive- but it is true. The easiest way to short-circuit all of this is to approach stewardship with an attitude of guilt- for guilt separates us from experiencing God's grace, and if we cannot experience God's grace then we certainly cannot rely on God's promises and priorities to meet our needs. If we cannot rely on God then we are back to our own 2 hands- and that leads to anxiety.

We are going to be OK. I know that 415K seems like a huge number, but that includes both our mortgage and a less than 1% increase in operating costs. The next 5 weeks is crunch time, for on All Saints Day we will dedicate the 2010 pledges to the

Lord's work and then Session will have to make decisions based on those numbers. We will, of course, spend some time interpreting budget priorities – that is the responsible thing to do.

Jesus ends with telling his disciples that they should sell all that they have and give alms to the poor. Of course, down through the centuries there have been those men and women that have taken this literally. But Jesus is simply stating the point that he has made already- place ourselves in God's service and all of our needs will be taken care of. Let us place ourselves in God's hands- and at God's service.