

“Keeping Value”

Matthew 16:21-28

It might seem like I am trivializing a critical gospel passage or that I am leveraging it's power for the sake of the institution... the church. But, this is a stewardship passage. Denying yourself, taking up the cross is stewardship wisdom. It's wisdom for how to spend your life; how to use what you have. What good will it be to gain the whole world, and lose your soul? It is so easy to lose sight of what is valuable. We are easily seduced by the liturgies of consumption that surround us everyday. They define what is valuable and what is not... who is worthy and who is not.

This September we will be focusing on stewardship. Generous stewardship flourishes in communities of trust. And in communities of trust generosity begets generosity. We will consider the stewardship of money, community, time, and talents.

Stewardship is the sacred care for what God has generously given us. When Adam and Eve were placed in the garden and given the sacred vocation to tend the garden

— they were given the vocation to be stewards. Take care of the gifts of creation. Care for this earth which is given generously. And so when we talk about sacred care for what God has given us— Stewardship— we are talking about taking care of the life we are given, the lives of others around us, the gifts, talents and resources we are given too. Jesus was not shy about money. He knew that we struggle with security and that we find security in collecting wealth. Jesus knew it could become an idol for us. An amnesia-causing idol leading us to forget what is truly valuable. Keeping value is difficult, but generosity might just be the best way to keep up. Community doesn't work without generosity. My friend Kevin says, “Whether you give big checks or you love to hug necks, we all have something worth giving...!”

There's an old story about a Baptist preacher who had just finished his sermon for the day and went to the back of the church to greet the congregation. After shaking a few adult hands he came upon the seven year old son

of one of the Deacons of the church. "Good morning, Jonathan," the preacher said as he reached out to shake Jonathan's hand. As he did he felt something in the palm of Jonathan's hand. "What's this?" the preacher asked.

"Money," said Jonathan with a big smile on his face, "It's for you!"

"I don't want to take your money, Jonathan," the preacher answered.

"I want you to have it," said Jonathan. After a short pause Jonathan continued, "I want to help. My dad says you're the poorest preacher we ever had."

We all have something to give. A Methodist pastor named Mike Mather, told a story from early in his ministry when he was called to South Bend, Indiana, to serve a small church. This parish of about 40 congregants housed a little food bank for hungry folks in the neighborhood. Neighbors would arrive and be asked a series of questions about their income, expenses, and dependents. Then the information was put in a filing cabinet and was never looked at again since it didn't really have a purpose other than proving that the people coming in for a can of soup

really needed the canned goods. One Pentecost Sunday, a congregant approached Mike after the service and said, "Pastor, you said that on Pentecost the Apostle Peter preached the Prophet Joel who said something like, 'I will pour my spirit out on your boys and girls, young and old.' Is that right? So, the Holy Spirit gives gifts to everyone?" Mike, said, "That's it! You got it." "Then, how come when people come to the food pantry, we just ask them how poor they are? Don't you think they have something to give back?"

Mike was speechless, and a new mission for their mission was born. They changed the questionnaire to ask questions about what clients possessed, not what they lacked. They asked every client in the Food Bank, "What are three things you could teach someone else how to do?"

One woman, said, "I can cook." Mike said, "Prove it! Tomorrow come cook lunch for the church office administrator, the janitor, and me." The food was excellent, so the church bought 100 business cards for her. Then at the next Chamber of Commerce meeting, she catered, and Mike passed out the new business cards. And that's

how the best Tex-Mex spot in South Bend, Indiana was born.¹

Stewardship involves recognizing and managing God's gifts. The first part is critical because it gets the momentum of gratitude on our side. Recognize that you are gifted. If you don't know how. Come see me. We'll figure it out together. We will discern together. Maybe you can talk about this with a friend at lunch. What are your gifts? What do you have to give? What are you managing now? Give thanks for that. And look for where you should be spending those gifts. Spending and consuming won't remind you of what is truly valuable, generosity will. Giving is what we do best. It's why Jesus tells us, "Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it." We are immersed in the liturgies of consumer culture all week long. We are told, you are what you have. Jesus says you are what you give. If you give your life (for my sake) you will have life. That which is nearest and dearest to us, that which we cannot give is what Jesus asks us to give up when we take up our cross. It is the last step in ridding ourselves of the idols we cling to in order to take up faith in Jesus. This is why

we practice giving our money. Because so often faith in money is the last thing we think we can give up.

It's not a direct path from giving money to taking up one's cross. Financial stewardship, giving generously, is meant to remind us of the proper value of things/stuff and the real value of our lives which are the greatest gift from God. The basis of this gift is what reminds us that really, all good gifts come from God. Generosity is a spiritual practice that builds strength... the strength we need to take up our cross and follow God and leave consumer culture behind when we do.

There's a quote on the cover of the order of worship from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It's one of my favorite quotes from the martyred Lutheran pastor. "The Church is the Church only when it exists for others...not dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell men of every calling what it means to live for Christ, to exist for others." This is a guiding principle for me when I think about a vision for our church. What we do is not a means of "getting more members" or "raising the budget". Our ministry here is a gift. Our ministry here is a

generous offering supported by generous offerings. We need you; we need your generosity.

Sometimes when you look at our budget and see that 17-18% goes to missions and ministry you aren't getting the whole story. That's just the mission and ministries budget which supports agencies and nonprofits who do amazing work of compassion, justice, and mission in the name of Jesus. But, our buildings & grounds budget is also missions money. It goes to keeping the lights on and providing clean, safe, hospitable space for ministry. We host about 125 English-as-second language students every week. We host an exercise class whose proceeds go to an animal shelter; instead of rent we ask them to provide scholarships to the class for those who can't afford it. Each summer the ISAAC Project uses our campus to train lay church members from across the country to act as immigration lawyers— this country is short on immigration lawyers and churches are taking up the slack to make sure that immigrants get a fair hearing in a reasonable amount of time. This church is part of the larger church of Jesus Christ when we do not exist for ourselves but for others— helping, serving, calling others to take up their

cross, deny their lesser self and follow.

All this kind of sacrifice, all this kind of bold generosity takes an enormous amount of trust. But, generosity has a certain momentum to it. Once it gets going it's hard to stop. It's contagious. Generosity begets generosity.

My friend Kevin helped start an organization in Kenya called Sodzo International. The President, Michael Raimer-Goodman, is a Professor of Public Health at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Houston. While working on his doctorate, Michael was asked to figure out how to help the children living on the streets in Kenya. In 2012, the Methodist conference agreed to allow Michael to construct a rescue center for children on an 80-acre farm owned by the church. My friend Kevin joined Michael on a scouting trip, and he returned from meeting the children living on the streets ready to raise the support. People had so many questions, rightly so, and it seemed like the risks outweighed the benefits for almost everyone we talked to. There were so many questions?

Then, in December of 2014, on Christmas Day, Kevin's 8 year-old niece handed hi an envelope, and inside the envelope was a letter from his brother and sister-in-law, which said, 'When you came back from Kenya, we knew what we needed to give you for Christmas this year, so here is a check for \$5,000 for the farm in Kenya'. Kevin's brother is a history professor at a community college and sister-in-law is a fourth grade teacher. This was no small gift for them. But, they believed these children deserved a chance. Then, that night Kevin went out with two of friends. Making conversation, they asked, "Did you get anything cool for Christmas?" He told them he got the best gift ever! He told them the story, and the next day they called and said, "Count us in, too." The day after that, Michael told this story to his friend who had planned to give a little to help start Sodzo. After hearing the story, he said, "Wait, teachers gave \$5,000? I'm a financial analyst. I need to talk to my wife and rethink what we were going to give." He committed \$10,000 a year for three years. A few months later Kevin's church came through with funding, and within 24 hours Sodzo was awarded grants for \$12,000 and \$75,000. Generosity begets

generosity. Sodzo is an organization we support. Dropping money in the offering plate on Sundays is no mundane act... it's life changing. It supports this community which supports Sodzo bringing children off the streets to feed them and give them hope that they too have something to give. Generosity begets generosity.

We have watched this come true again this week. When football player J.J Watt started his social media campaign to raise money for victims of Hurricane Harvey he set a goal of \$500,000. Last I heard he had raised over \$16 million. The Salvation Army raised \$2 million during the Cowboy's preseason game on Thursday night. Budweiser stopped making beer and sent cans full of water to Houston. We've seen the videos of heroic rescues. People giving boats. Giving generators. Giving trucks full of supplies. Giving time at shelters. Giving hugs to people who have lost everything. Erica Hanchey has been working the past week on HEB's emergency response teams trying to get grocery stores back open. A few days ago she was in an HEB in the cypress area talking with a manager back on the receiving dock when 3 teenagers

approached them— 2 boys and a girl about 15. One of the boys asked if they had any boxes. The manager said, “Tell me what you are going to use them for, so I make sure that they will work for you.” The girl stepped up and said, “We are packing donations to help people... for God.” Without a word the manager and Erica grabbed a pallet full of boxes and gave them to the three. Off they went. We’ve seen this spirit all over the Texas coast the past week. Why? Generosity begets generosity.

We’ve seen this before. No matter how much Hollywood and the media advance the idea that disasters bring out the worst in people—we’ve seen otherwise. Scientists who have studied people in disasters say otherwise. These disasters bring out the best in us.² The social norms and behavioral patterns go out the window and what is left is what we believe to be right. And in that moment we are called to act— help, serve, now. And the generosity begins. One act at a time. One dollar at a time. One hug at a time. Until little by little healing comes. Why wait for a hurricane? Jesus calls us now— take up your cross. Deny yourself. Forget what is expected of you. Give up the life

you planned. Take up the life that is true life— the life that is abundant, eternal. There you will be found. We all have something to give. Somehow, somewhere we have to get started.

¹ From sermon by Kevin Sinclair, “The Kingdom Per Diem”, 23 April 2017, Wilshire Baptist Church, Dallas, TX, http://www.wilshirebc.org/download_file/view/4209/

² Katy Waldman, “Why It’s Misleading to Say That Houston Showcases ‘America at Its Best’”, *Slate*, 29 August 2017, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/metropolis/2017/08/houston_doesn_t_showcase_america_at_its_best.html