

## 2/5/23 WORSHIP SERVICE

### MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

O God, we give you thanks and praise for your countless good gifts. Thank you for the ways your Holy Spirit is present with us – even when we may not recognize it. And we thank you for the vastness of your creation that is beyond what we can see or imagine or understand.

We're grateful for opportunities to gather for worship and fellowship, to take time to sing, to pray, to learn, to rest, to remember that we are your people and you are our God. With sincerity and humble boldness we offer you our prayers.

God, we thank you for the children of this community and this congregation. And we thank you for those who teach and guide them – in school and here at church. Be with our youngest children as they are just beginning to learn and understand the stories of Jesus. We pray for our Jr High students as their learning expands and they begin to formulate questions and ideas. Thank you for the Know Jesus conference that took place in Hesston this weekend; we pray that what was learned about you there will take root and produce good fruit. We pray for our High school students as they enter these weeks of Faith Exploration. We pray for a spirit of openness and curiosity for the students as they read and listen and participate in their own faith development.

O God, we pray for healing for those struggling with all manner of illness – in body, mind or spirit. We thank you for healing that has happened and wellness that has returned and we're grateful for the ways you've created us – we thank you that the body has such remarkable healing powers. We pray especially for those whose journey toward healing is a longer one, for those receiving on-going treatments, or who have health issues that do not resolve quickly or easily. Rest on these, your children, with perseverance, courage and comfort.

We pray for those who are grieving. May your Spirit of Love and Light be a particular gift to those in grief.

Thank you God for those in our congregations and in our denomination who bring us the beauty of your creativity and diversity. We pray your blessing on the Black, Indigenous and people of color among us – may our hearts and minds be open to the specific gifts and wisdom that they bring out of their lives and experiences. Be with those who have met together this weekend in Atlanta. May their time together be rich and fruitful.

Thank you for your presence with us, God as we continue to worship you. Make us aware and attentive to your Spirit as we eat and fellowship together and then gather for our meeting. Bless us with your grace and wisdom – move in our midst and grant us what is needed. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

## COSTLY TREASURE – PASTOR CALEB

Matthew 13:44-52

### WHY IS IT HARD TO TALK ABOUT MONEY?

It's hard to talk about money in church. Especially when the conversation is beyond the nuts and bolts of the church budget, and moves to how we as families and individuals actually handle our money.

I heard of a small church so focused on discipleship that members would tell the rest of the congregation what their incomes were and how they envisioned using their resources in the coming year to serve God. They would submit to the counsel of the rest of the congregation on how to do that.

But this became too difficult a practice to sustain. To see the incomes of the wealthiest members alongside the poorest was deeply uncomfortable. When the congregation would give input into people's use of money, it became personal. One member had planned a trip to Europe that was very important to them, and it was very painful to hear others say that this was poor stewardship as a disciple of Jesus.

Even in our own families, we may choose to talk about other vulnerable topics before we address money. Matters of inheritance, or comparing how much parents financially assist their children as they enter adulthood can stress relationships.

Why is it so hard to talk about money? It may be because we have powerful emotions connected to money, as well as education, skill sets, or resources.

- There's fear of not having enough for future expenses.
- There's anxiety about whether or not you are making all the smart choices with your money.
- There's shame from financial struggles, or shame from struggling to be completely self-sufficient.
- There's envy of what another person has or has accomplished.
- There's guilt for not giving enough or guilt for having too much, when so many don't have their basic needs met.

The Bible is anything but silent about money. 16 of the 38 parables told by Jesus (depending on how you count them) have to do with money or possessions. Someone counted 2,300 passages in the Old and New Testaments about money or wealth, compared to 700 that are about love.

The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman said, "I have... come to the conclusion that the Bible is indeed about money and possessions... It is astonishing that the church has willingly engaged in a misreading of the biblical text in order to avoid the centrality of money in its testimony."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Brueggemann, Walter. *Money and Possessions*. Westminster Knox Press, 2016; cited in Lake Institute on Faith and Giving, *Cultivating Generous Congregations*

At the heart of discipleship is the issue of stewardship.

WHAT IS STEWARDSHIP?

What is stewardship? The English word “steward” refers to a someone employed to manage the property of another, particularly a large house or estate. We have some references in popular culture: I think of Denethor from the *Lord of the Rings*, who was called the “steward” of Gondor, because he acted as its ruler, while the actual throne was vacant.

Stewardship in the Christian life has to do with how we manage all the resources in our control. How we use money reflects our spiritual life, as well as what we truly value. Our definition of “possessions” can be expanded to include our time, our education, our skill sets and accomplishments, and even our ideas or dreams.

What do these very short parables or stories of Jesus have to do with stewardship? The passages Elroy read are from Matthew 13, a whole chapter devoted to parables.

In the first parable, a day laborer accidentally stumbles on buried treasure. It was common practice in ancient times to bury treasure as a way to keep it secure, rather than have it in a house vulnerable to an attack by bandits. By buying the field, the buyer has a rightful claim to the treasure that is found within it.

In the second story, a traveling merchant discovers an extremely valuable pearl and sells all his other wares in order to obtain it. In both of these stories, it is implied that the thing obtained – buried treasure, or a costly pearl – are both more valuable than everything that was sold or given up to obtain it.

The treasure symbolizes the kingdom of God, so Jesus teaches that all that we possess does not compare with the value of being able to be a part of life in God’s kingdom. The real treasure for which we “sell” all else is the meaningful life of living according to God's reign, knowing ourselves to belong to our loving God.

Few Christians have literally sold or forfeit all their material resources. But we are called to evaluate how we use or steward the resources entrusted to us within our life purpose of living for God’s kingdom. In the expansive sense of stewardship, this includes how we tend to our relationships, what we do with our time, or how we develop or gifts and skill sets.

Beryl Jantzi gave this modern version of Jesus’ second story:<sup>2</sup>

A woman is shopping in a market, and finds an extremely precious pearl in an obscure shop.

The shopkeeper is willing to sell it for everything the woman has. Since she wants it badly, she writes a check for the full amount of her checking and savings accounts. She signs over the deed to our house and car. She arranges to transfers her retirement accounts to the shopkeeper.

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<sup>2</sup> Jantzi, Beryl, Everence, *But it’s only a story: What Jesus’ stories teach us about money*, <https://www.everence.com/resources/stewardship-education>

The shopkeeper then says to a woman we would consider absolutely nuts: "The pearl is yours!"

The woman is delighted, as she turns to leave, still not thinking about where she will live, the shopkeeper calls her back.

"I'm going to give you back everything you gave me in exchange for the pearl. Of course, they still belong to me, but I will let you have use of them as long as you live. You can continue to live in your house and drive your car. I ask just this one thing: you must share your house, car, and other wealth with those that I send your way."

The woman is overjoyed.

This modern version is not any more probable in the literal sense than the original parables Jesus told his audience. But there's a clear message.

When you consider whether to become a disciple of Jesus you have to make a major choice. You can forfeit any claim on God's kingdom. Then you can keep everything that you have. But you must know they will not last forever. Your stuff, as well as your titles, your accomplishments, or anything at all that might give you status or respect or praise -- all of it will die with you.

Or you choose to become a disciple. You can live in community with people doing their best to live in God's reign and you hope in God's reign coming in full. In exchange, you give up everything else. Nothing is really yours any longer.

You might still live in your home, but you are just long-term house-sitting. The Christian prophetic tradition says that your house belongs to whatever person who comes your way that needs shelter and hospitality. These are challenging teachings!

So how are you doing with as a manager of God's things?

There are many facets of stewardship, and we hope to continue to connect other topics and scriptures throughout the year to stewardship.

Some of you are farmers or directly work with the land, and all of us impact the earth by the way that we go about life. Unfortunately, we live in a culture that has taken the natural world for granted and has created systems that we all participate in that have harmful effects on the earth and our climate.

One of you shared an Indian proverb that says that the "earth was not given to you by your parents. It was loaned to you by your children. We do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children."

Stewardship means understanding ourselves not as having the rights of an owner, being able to dispose of our resources as we please, but rather people who manage resources that do not really belong to us. We must manage them in ways that honor the one to whom they really belong.

In preparing this series, I am making use of a four-part study by Beryl Jantzi. Jantzi referenced these two short parables in the first part.

I extended the scripture reading from just the two short parables to also include the verses that follow (Matt 13:47-52).

It may be harder to see their connection with stewardship. Certainly, Matthew could have given a random selection of parables, but quite often we must read the Gospels with the hunch that the Gospel writer were very intentional about how they arranged their material. I have to think they are still connected.

In this next parable, Jesus tells of a fishing net – probably a dragnet with floats at the top and weights tied to the bottom. The net is cast out and captures all manner of fish or sea creatures. It is then necessary to sort everything that is caught, keeping the good fish, and throwing back what is not good, kosher, or edible.

Sorting is a common theme in Matthew's Gospel. God will sort between the good and the wicked at the end of the age, but what does that mean for the present? We must be diligent about doing our own sorting with all the things of our lives that demand hold on our attention and hearts. We must make principled choices about how we use our money, time, ideas, and deepest values.

We already make choices, because we can't help but make choices. The next step is to make find the space for being present to God, in order for all the rest to be relativized in importance.

Verse 52 intrigues me: "Every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."

Jesus was probably referring to the old treasure of Israel's scriptures and the new treasure of Jesus' message and ministry.

Most of us have a lot of stuff, some of which we could do without. Sometimes, it's the challenge of finding someone to give it away to or a means of disposing of some items.

Other times, we lack the time to really sort through our stuff. We can't just get a dumpster and chuck stuff in, because there might be old treasures there we aren't ready to part with. Or we haven't even had a chance to evaluate what is valuable and what is not.

This literal sorting is hard enough. Harder still is to be mindful of where we dedicate time and energy. We can grasp this teaching conceptually, but it is hard to live it out. Hard even to have the imagination for practical and creative ideas we might try as individuals and a congregation.

WE ALL HAVE STORIES OF STEWARDSHIP

We can begin by having conversations about stewardship. We all have stories of stewardship. The Everence curriculum by Beryl Jantzi suggests considering our "stewardship autobiographies."

So, I think about my own “stewardship autobiography.” I grew up with Midwestern values of not spending money on what you don't need.

I never heard the words “A penny saved is a penny earned,” but I certainly grew up thinking about money in those terms. If you avoid spending \$100, that's \$100 more that you have for the future.

I witnessed my dad work long hours. Often too long, but it did communicate responsibility and commitment. I got my first checking account around the age of 14 or 15. I learned to track my income (usually working for my dad) and expenses, and accounted for money in 4H projects.

I went to college and was on my own for daily expenses, but I was also conscious of not yet being financially independent. I was still supported by my parents and school loans.

My own attitudes about money and stewardship were also shaped by the years after college when I served in Honduras with Mennonite Central Committee. I constantly handled cash and had to track every small expense. Some were reimbursable, and others had to be deducted from my monthly stipend.

It was hard to explain the arrangement to my neighbors who assumed I surely had wealth – why didn't I show it? Why didn't I buy a motorcycle for instance to get around faster?

Living in a place with poverty and a different economy of scale changed my view of money from most middle-class Americans. I witnessed way economic injustice is baked into the structure of our global economy. Most people I know in the United States are free of struggle for basic needs, even though we are not free from other forms of struggle, pain, or grief.

This is not because we are entitled to this, or that our situation is the norm. It is because of where we were born, and the demographic we come from.

When I got a bacterial infection that got into my bloodstream and suddenly occluded the vision of my left eye, I had access to resources my Honduran neighbors would not have had access too.

MCC paid for a last-minute flight back to the states, covered medical care that would have amounted to about \$30,000. While there was some sort of insurance arrangement, I imagined \$30,000 somehow deducted from what MCC could invest in disadvantaged communities.

Was I really worth that expense? What entitled me to this? There was no way to avoid seeing my privilege, which was uncomfortable to me. I felt guilt. I was challenged to accept something I didn't do anything to earn. This was an invitation for me to view my life as an opportunity to give back.

## CONCLUSION

Let us now begin a conversation about stewardship that will continue in the coming weeks about how we view wealth and how we practice generosity. Our challenge is to begin sharing our stories and experiences relating to stewardship and our use of resources.

What experiences have shaped you?

The ultimate goal is not simply conversation, but that we may hear the Spirit inspire us to practice stewardship in created and dedicated ways in our individual lives and as a congregation. God doesn't necessarily ask us to give up in the absolute sense all that is important to us. God asks us to order those things so that they serve God's project.

Let none of our "possessions" in the broad definition become absolutes for us. Let the only absolute be God's project.

Let us remember that we are all just people, with the emotions of fear, shame, envy, guilt, and envy I mentioned initially. The early Christian theologian John Chrysostom said that "when death comes, the theater is emptied and everyone puts off the masks of wealth or poverty; all are judged by their deeds."

Indeed, money is a mask we wear as part of a constructed identity of worth. Underneath that mask, we are all people, all equally in need of the grace and love of God and one another.

## BENEDICTION AND PRAYER

### **Let's pray a prayer of blessing for the meal:**

God of abundance,

Let us eat at your welcoming table, and may we hinder no one.

As we eat and drink, we give thanks:

For the goodness of food,

For the goodness of work and play,

For the delight of friendship,

And the Love of Christ that is with us always.

### **[Benediction]**

May God bless you with the abundant riches of the treasure worth all other things.

May you live this week for God's project, and may God give you wisdom for every decision great and small you make with all that God has entrusted to us.