

## A Steward's Heart

Third in a Series, "A Heart From God / A Heart For People

September 18, 2022

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Amos 8:4-7, I Timothy 6:6-10, Luke 16: 1-13

*I Corinthians 4:1 - Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. 2 Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

Today's sermon is the third in a four part series focused on our Mission Statement here at Faith Lutheran - *A Heart From God / A Heart For People.*

Last week, we explored what it meant to have *A Shepherd's Heart* - 1) aching for and searching for the lost and 2) celebrating and caring for the found.

Two weeks ago - *A Disciple's Heart* - 1) Making hard choices, 2) Bearing our assigned crosses, 3) Renouncing our possessions.

Next Sunday - "*A Rich Man's Heart.*" Today, "*A Steward's Heart.*"

Rule #1 for a steward is to know that he's not the owner. The owner is the owner, and the steward is the manager, or in some cases the renter.

There are important differences between owning and renting. Debi and I know this to be true firsthand. For the first twenty four years of ministry, we lived in church owned parsonages. In effect, we were renters. The advantages of that included that I didn't have to pay property taxes. When repairs or improvements needed to be made, I called my favorite trustees, and like magic, they happened!

In May of 2004, we purchased our own home right next to Trinity Lutheran in Janesville. I remember signing the papers, walking back to our new home, looking at a beautiful tree in our front yard, and remarking to Debi that it was the first tree I had ever owned. I was proud of that tree. I enjoyed that tree. I reveled in that tree. Until a strong wind came along about ten years later and brought that tree crashing down upon the roof of our house. At which time there was no more magic of calling my friendly trustees who would come on over and make everything better.

This weekend's appointed lessons remind us that God is the owner of all and that we are, in effect, the renters. Or to use the language of today's parable - we are stewards, or

managers of true riches. Paul writes it this way to the Corinthians, ...*that we are stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful.*"

### *A bad idea that turned out well!*

I read a story about an ESPN College Football Game Day between Iowa and Iowa State a few years ago. It's a big deal with a big crowd, lots of students dressed up in their school colors, folks holding up homemade signs to grab attention. One of the signs which drew a lot of attention was a white sign, drawn with a black Sharpie, and its message was simple: "Busch Light supply needs replenished" and on the bottom, this enterprising young man included his Venmo account. People who saw his sign could digitally wire him money, and that's exactly what started happening. Within a few hours, people had sent him \$600. At which point he decided to look beyond himself. He turned it into a fund raiser for a Children's Hospital that overlooks the stadium in Ames, Iowa. When all was said and done, Anheuser Busch and Venmo agreed to match donations, and the kid that started out asking for beer money ended up raising \$1,000,000 for Iowa Children's Hospital.

That wasn't only a selfish idea that turned out well. It's a great example of using resources that aren't really yours to serve a purpose greater than yourself. Which brings us to lesson #1 about what it means to be a faithful steward / manager of all of the time and the talents and the treasures on loan to us from God.

### *Faithful stewards are generous with their Master's wealth.*

Today's story is simple enough. There was a rich man who was so rich that he had to hire full time help to assist him in managing all of his different accounts. This particular manager was shady, to put it mildly. So shady that he was hauled in front of the boss and read the riot act about squandering and wasting the manager's assets. Since he wasn't manly enough to hold a real job and too ashamed to beg, he did what shrewd people do. He made friends while he still had the authority to make friends with his boss's money.

Now at first glance, it seems as though this steward had a self-centered plan, what we would call a bad and a sleazy plan, that he carried out his bad plan, and that he should be roundly criticized, ostracized, and punished for doing so. But that's not what happens. If you think about it, the story ends with a win, win, win. The debtors get their debt reduced and therefore go away happy. The boss man gets some good publicity out and about in the community. And the steward, even though he is unemployed, has made some new friends and gets praised for his shrewdness!

Biblical scholars interpret this parable in all kinds of different directions. Professor Art Just from the Ft. Wayne Seminary invites us to **focus on the mercy** of the master in this

parable. He suggests that when the report about wastefulness comes, the lord tells the steward he is fired, but he does not throw him into jail or punish him, which would have been his right. **He shows mercy** by asking him to give a final accounting. It is **this mercy** that the steward banks on in deciding upon the solution to his problem.

And so he proceeds to reduce one bill from 100 baths of olive oil to 50 and another one of 100 kors of wheat to 80. Certain scholars suggest that the rich man may well have been charging excessive interest, which was a source of controversy throughout the ages, and the forgiveness of debt may have created all kinds of good will in the community.

Speaking of creating goodwill in the community with someone else's money, I'm reminded of my years as a member of the Rotary Club in Janesville, MN. For a couple of decades or so, we sponsored a pull tab operation at the American Legion, and there were years where we gave away as much as \$5-8,000. Recipients were very grateful. We felt like Santa Claus - all year long, being generous with money we could claim no credit for raising.

At the heart of Christian stewardship is a focus on the wealth of the Master. That was true in the case of the steward in today's parable. He knew that His boss had plenty of money to go around. He made friends with that money. He created good will with that money. He canceled debt with that money. He provided for his future with that money. At the heart of Christian living is a focus on the wealth of the Master, or the good will of the Father. That was true in the case of the Prodigal Son, recorded in Luke 15. Only after he had squandered all of his inheritance, and only after he had sown all of his wild oats, and only after he had bought the last round of drinks he could afford, and only after he found himself wanting to eat the food pigs were eating - only then did he remember how green were the pastures and still were the waters and sumptuous were the feasts back at his father's house. Only then did he remember how good and how gracious and how decent and how protective and how loving was his father.

Dear friends in Christ, in the moment that the prodigal son realized that the solution to his predicament rested in the mercy of his father, all of heaven took note. Picture this failure of a son with his head down / absolutely ashamed of himself / just wanting for dad to let him be a hired man making minimum wage, and here comes dad sprinting down the driveway / a heart full of forgiveness / tears of mercy streaming down his face / can't wait to tell his son how much he missed him and still loves him / and in one corner of heaven the angels are doing a line dance, and in another corner the archangels are doing a chorus of A Mighty Fortress is Our God, and in another corner thousands and thousands of grateful and forgiven saints are declaring that all blessing and honor and glory and praise and thanksgiving belong to Jesus Christ the Lamb of God who takes away the guilt of our sins / he takes away the power of our sins / he takes away the eternal consequences of our sins.

The kingdom of God is like a renter who has his bad days, his good days, and his really good days. On his bad days, he thinks of himself as the owner, he stumbles into stinginess, and he shows little to no concern for the hard working poor of his day. On his good days, he confesses the good that he has failed to do and he cries out for wisdom from above. On his really good days, his eyes are opened to the needs of hurting and broken people all around him. His gratefulness to God for superabundant blessings received spills over in all kinds of ways in a way that gives glory to God and creates goodwill near and far.

*Faithful stewards are proactive with regard to their eternal dwellings.*

The simple principle Jesus would teach us today is that worldly wealth is a gift from God to be used for the glory of God and to show love for those in need. Pharisees saw riches as a sign of God's special favor, but Jesus would open our eyes to see riches as an opportunity for that win/win - to give glory to God and show God's love for a neighbor who needs help.

One of the questions I often ask my Confirmation Classes is what they would do with a million dollars. Of course, they would give me a variety of answers. Then I would point out to them that if at age 25 they earned \$50,000 a year for 20 years, they would earn a million dollars. Of course, this would lead to a discussion of Christian stewardship, and I would invite them to see that if they could joyfully give away ten percent of that million dollars, they would be giving away \$100,000 over the course of those 20 years, by the time they were 45 years old.

In the year 2013, by God's grace, we were able to complete a 1.8 million dollar Discipling Center at Trinity Lutheran in Janesville, which included a nice fellowship hall, a Welcome Center, a beautiful chapel, spacious offices, etc. But at the same time, for a mere \$18,000, or 1% of 1.8 million, we were able to build a four room Lutheran School in Liberia, which soon filled up with 400 students eager to hear about Jesus Christ and to learn how to read, write and do some arithmetic, as well.

Just this week, I read an update that in the year 2017, Liberian Children's Ministry was operating 14 Lutheran Schools in a land where ½ of the adults may be illiterate. 5000 children are enrolled in those schools / over 420 were baptized in one year, and children were being educated for \$25 a year.

Listen again to the words of Jesus, **“And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth (money), so that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.”**

I think of those children across the seas baptized into the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Spirit / not so much as my friends or your friends, but as friends of Jesus. Jesus, the Friend of sinners near and far, without exception. Jesus, the Creator of all and yet as true man owner of nothing. Jesus, who for the joy of spending eternity with us, gave up the riches of heaven, he accepted the poverty of a Bethlehem manger, he endured the obscurity of a Nazareth childhood, he persevered through the agony of Gethsemane and was crucified at Calvary until dead and buried.

Now, as you well know, He is risen, ascended into heaven, sitting at the right hand of the Father, once again possessing all of heaven's riches and glory, ruling with all authority on behalf of His Church. His assignment to us as stewards is that we be faithful, not only with whatever earthly riches may come our way, but especially with true riches - the grace, the mercy, and the truths of God's Word.

His closing reminder to us was that no servant could serve two masters - that we can't have it both ways, we will have to choose between loving God with all of our hearts or loving money and the happiness money can buy.

Luke describes the Pharisees as lovers of money, and he records that they ridiculed Jesus for saying this. Jesus looked them in the eyes and set them straight, "You fellows look good in the sight of people, but God knows your hearts, and in His sight, you are an abomination. Which leads to our final point of the day.

*It's not wrong to be rich, but it's dangerous.*

Paul said it this way to Timothy, **"But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils."**

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers who are traveling through the ups and downs of life together. They are dearly loved by God in heaven above. Jesus is their Owner. He has bought them at a great price. Not with gold or silver, but with holy and precious blood, and with innocent suffering and death, He has purchased them to be His own. On their forgetful days, they get turned in on themselves, they complain about inflation, and they pay almost no attention to those who truly need help. On their good days, they confess their faults and the good they have failed to do, they cry out for a new beginning, and the grace of God sweeps over their collective souls. On their really good days, they go looking for worthy causes to support, they are generous with their Master's mercy, and they are proactive with the use of their time, their talents, and their treasure.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.