

Sermon for November 13, 2022— “Talents”

Thirty-third Sunday in OT, Year C—Texts: 1 Peter 4:7-11; Ephesians 4:1-16

Today, I want to talk about stewardship.

But I want to talk about it because when Scripture speaks about stewardship, it addresses much more than money, it speaks to the entirety of our lives. Wise money management is simply one part of what it means to be a good steward. So, being a good steward entails much, much more than the way we spend money. But before I get too deeply into this—I think a definition would be helpful here, if only to set a kind of context, for what I want to say this morning about stewardship.

The question is: What’s a steward? Well, in the most simplistic terms a steward is a manager who administers that which belongs to someone else. If you own a business and hire an administrator to oversee the finances of that business, you have hired a manager. The money they manage is not theirs; they cannot spend it as they please. It goes without saying that the money they manage belongs to the company, and if they misuse it we call that embezzlement, something we all recognize as a criminal offense.

So, if you’re a follower of Jesus Christ, as I imagine you are; if you’ve denied yourself, taken up your cross, and have given your life to Him, which I imagine you have, then like that manager, what you manage is not your own. In fact, you own nothing but are merely a steward, or a manager, for you have surrendered your claim to everything you thought you owned and you have given it to Christ. Are you with me so far? Good.

Now, according to your own acknowledgment, God owns it all. It is at His disposal to do with as He will. To do otherwise would be to embezzle that which belongs to God. As one Catholic bishop wrote, “Life is a gift from God. All that we have in this life is part of that gift. Stewardship reinforces this belief and reminds us that our time, talents, and resources are the gifts through which we show our love and appreciation to God.”

What this tells us is that besides our treasure (and our butter), this also includes, naturally, our time and talents. Still, as much as I’d like to talk about time here too, it’s our talents that I want to focus on this morning. To that end, it must be stated that God owns our talents. They—like everything else—are gifts of God, given by God through the Holy Spirit. Now, there’s nothing wrong with wealth or influence, but those things alone won’t change the world and they aren’t what we were made for.

We were made to build up the church, and to be the church. God made each one of us with unique talents, personalities and skill sets. God made us to be salt and light and the best was to do that is in using our God-given talents, gifts and abilities in God’s service as part of the ministries and mission of the church.

Now, I imagine that this all sounds well and good, but some of you might be saying give me one good reason why I should serve the church? Just one? I’ll give you **eight** reasons.

So without further ado, because time is money, here they are:

First, serving allows us to discover and develop our spiritual gifts.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote, **“As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace,”** and, **“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”**

So, just as our bodies are made of many parts serving specific functions, the church is made up of people with different skills and abilities. And notice that Paul doesn’t say that they’re for our enjoyment or for our own personal use. So, alone these pieces aren’t very useful, but together we create something beautiful.

Second, serving allows us to experience miracles.

Consider the Wedding at Cana, where the wine ran out. Hearing of this, Jesus tells the servants to fill several big jars to the brim. As they did this the water turned to wine. The guests never knew what happened; the servants were the ones who witnessed the miracle. The same is true for us when we serve. If you’ve ever been on a mission trip, chances are you’ve witnessed something that can only be described as a miracle. As it happens, they’re more common than you might think.

Third, Serving allows us to experience the joy and peace that comes from obedience.

In his first letter, as we heard in our first reading, Peter wrote, **“Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms...If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.**

Serving is a form of worship, a way to express gratitude for what Jesus has done for us, and to share the love and grace we’ve been given.

Fourth, serving helps us to be more like Jesus.

We shift our focus off of ourselves onto others through serving. We begin to see others as Jesus sees them. And we see Jesus IN others. As Jesus tells the sheep in Matthew’s Gospel: **“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.”**

Fifth, serving surrounds us with other Christians who can help us follow Jesus.

When we’re working side by side with other people, a bond inevitably forms. This was part of God’s plan for how the church is supposed to work. That’s why the letter to the Hebrews instructs us to **“spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together...but encouraging one another.”**

Sixth, serving increases our faith.

As we move out of our comfort zones, God increases our faith by revealing new potential, in ourselves and in his Church. When we see what he can do, and what we can do when his power is at work within us, we begin looking for the doors he’s opening rather than trying to push our way through the one’s he’s closed.

Seventh, serving allows us to experience God's presence in new ways.

Encouragement and healing go hand in hand. As we encourage others and they find healing, we're encouraged. It's the reason why so many people who go on mission trips say they came home feeling like they got more than they gave.

As Jesus Himself told his disciples, **"Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap, for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."**

And finally, the eighth reason is that serving—like confession—is good for the soul.

Studies have shown that volunteering is so good for the mind and body that it can ease symptoms of stress and depression. Tapping into our gifts and passions builds self-confidence, energy, and strength. Serving others can also be the best distraction from our own worries.

And there you have it. Eight—count 'em—eight good reasons for serving. Now, we make all sorts of rational explanations—excuses really—for not serving. I've heard them all numerous times. But—just for fun—let's go over them one more time...

I don't have time.

I'm too old.

I don't know what I would do.

I don't have any special skills to contribute.

They don't need me.

God can't use me.

None of these are true. I'm sorry, but they're not. Not one. We've talked about this before, and, quite frankly, I'm tired of doing so. You may recall that back on September 25, I said that God used men and women with similar doubts/excuses to change the course of history, and that God is still doing so, right now. So I'll ask again: Are we willing to let God use us? Are we ready to let God use us? Are we?

And so, brothers and sisters, here's the thing:

Right now there are a handful of people who've been doing most of the heavy lifting here at the church for quite a while—for some, years. They've been serving on Session, committees, showing up for events, and so on. Many of them—far too many—have done so without a break. It's not fair for them to continue to try to do this for much longer. I've told them that it's okay to step away if they feel they need to—even if there's no one to step in right away. They need a break. They deserve one. We must give them one. I intend to do so, but that means, of course, that we need others to step up.

Something else I said back on September 25 is that the time is coming soon when we will all have choices to make. Well, as we end the church calendar year next week on Christ the King Sunday, and the end of the regular calendar year in just over a month, I believe that now is that time. So—what will our choice be? How will we respond to this challenge?

Our Master has called us, equipped us and commissioned us with a mission. He is coming again someday and on that day we will give an account for how we've spent our time, how we've served God, how we've answered God's call to serve others through the church.

The reality is the Lord doesn't call the equipped; he equips the called. What's more, perhaps more profoundly, the God who shapes the back for the burden, also shapes the burden for the back

God doesn't just want to work **THROUGH** us, he wants to work **IN** us.

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.