

Sermon: The Stewardship of God

Lessons: Job 38: 1-7, 34-41; Hebrews 5: 1-10;
Mark 10: 35-45

Date: October 18, 2009

Preacher: The Rev. Merritt N. Schatz



This past week I received an email from my mother. It was one of those forwarded emails – you know the kind, with beautiful or cute pictures and inspiring words. The pictures in this were adorable – and endearing! There were animals of all kinds, unusual combinations of animals in affectionate poses – the most startling one was probably the deer gently licking the side of an undisturbed squirrel’s face. I have been told that was probably photo-shopped – maybe so, but it was still cute. It was a bright moment, uplifting in the midst of everyday tasks. And yet, as I noted to my mother, it was a pity that the person sending the message out in the first place couldn’t resist gilding the lily – or the photographs in this case. Toward the end of the forwarded part of the email, came the message, “Send this along to seven of your friends, and something wonderful will happen to by 11:23 this evening.” Perhaps the writer expected that using the oddly specific time of 11:23 would indicate to the reader that this comment was made with tongue in cheek. Too many times, however, the comment is made seriously. It struck me as further evidence that we are seldom content to enjoy God’s creation – or God’s grace - without taking God’s blessings for granted and resorting to a figurative “But what have you done for me lately?” mentality.

Now this is not new to our generation. When the Israelites are about to enter into the Promised Land, Moses warned them to observe their rituals of thanksgiving, lest, as he said, “When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them...do not say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.’” (Deut. 8: 12,17) And we sympathize completely with Job in his sense of injustice, needing to hear as he heard what we read this morning. God responds to Job’s complaints of injustice by asking “Where were you when the world was formed?” God implies that Job has stepped beyond his capabilities by questioning what is larger than himself. And again, in the passage from Mark, we find that James and John are not content with being Jesus’ disciples – they want the place of honor. These are just a few of the possible examples. Over and over again throughout the history of humankind, we have taken God’s blessings for granted, and ask for more. The real wonder is that, despite this, God continues to reach out to us, to love us. From the very act of creation, through the making of the covenant, the gift of grace in Jesus Christ, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the formation of the community of faith – The Church – and the call to each of us to become children of God, co-workers in God’s ministry – God reaches out to us with amazing mercy, forgiveness, righteousness, wisdom and love. Yet, all too often we respond with, “What is in it for me? If I do what you ask, what *further* benefit will I receive?”

This causes me to wonder if, according to human standards, God is a very good steward of all that God possesses. God entrusts fallible people with free will; is constant with forgiveness when we fail; gives of the divine self to the point of incarnation, and death on a

cross; hands on the divine ministry to people who from the first have been full of ambition, quarreling with one another over rank and privilege. If a human were to do this, we would call him or her foolish, if not reckless.

In his institutes, Calvin talks about this matter of perspective and the gift that God gives us in Jesus Christ. He suggests that if all we can see is similar to ourselves, we will not see clearly. His example is a piece of cloth, which if compared to another piece of cloth which is dark in color might then appear to be white. But if the same cloth is compared to a piece which has been bleached, the true color of the first cloth might be revealed to be tan. Likewise, if in our sins, we compare ourselves only to other sinful creatures, we may appear to be pure. But compared to Christ, real purity, our souls are shown to be the sinful natures that they truly are. Only in acknowledging our needs, might we be open to receiving God's grace in removing our sins from us. (1.1.2)

The same that can be said about perspective on sin can also be said about perspective on stewardship. God does not have to be a good steward – a steward cares for that which belongs to another. All belongs to God – and this is what we forget. God as sovereign of all, can in grace be forgiving without being unjust; can be vulnerable and take the risks which we, of our own accord, might not ourselves take. God in grace sacrifices so that we might live. God does not *have* to do these things, there is no compulsion. Yet God does them, because God loves.

We might say, “This is okay for God, for God owns everything, has everything, cannot – it appears – lose anything.” The question we want to ask, and do ask daily by our living, is does God have the right to ask us to do this with God? *We* are not omnipotent. *We* are not invulnerable.

The truth is that God does lose something when we reject God. God's vulnerability, as seen in Jesus Christ, is real. And once again we have that problem of perspective. If God were asking us to risk what is ours we might have a legitimate concern. However, God does have the right – all things come from God and are of God. None of us can create life – or endow ourselves with certain talents or abilities. We can only use what God has given us. We can use it well or ill, but we cannot create. Nevertheless, God does not exercise this right as a right. Rather, at the risk of being rejected yet again, God *invites* us in love to live the fullness of life that such living in accordance with God's will brings.

This invitation is made without any gilding, without any extraneous promises of immediate gratification. The life of faith has its tragedies as well as glories. It has its Gethsemane and Golgotha before its resurrection. There are no promises of joy by the human time table of 11:23 p.m. James and John were assured that they would indeed drink the cup which Jesus would drink, and suffer the baptism with which he was baptized – their request and expression of confidence was, after all, made after he had already explained, three times explained, that he must suffer and die,. They were, however, not promised any special notice or reward for this faithful discipleship. Jesus went on to remind all the disciples that the life of his

disciples, the life of faith, was not one of power or even authority as the world defines it. The Christian life is a life of humble service, just as was the life of Jesus Christ.

The faithful life is a life full of risks, as we put Christ forward as our example, and run the risk of missing out on some of the rewards which the world offers. It is the life of vulnerability, as we work beside our brother Christ, to care for others and share the hope which God has given knowing that we are more likely to be greeted with sneers and distrust – as Jesus was, than with thanksgiving. It is a life which demands much of us. The more we come to know God we come to know God's mystery, God's awesome nature and power. The closer we become to God and know the divine love and mercy, the more we are shaped and called into the image of Christ, and into Christ's loving service. The gifts we have received are life itself and eternal life in abundance. The life of faith to which we are called is a life fully engaged with God's ministry, with God's loving and just outreach to all peoples.

There is an old story of a young man graduating from college. He is from a well-to-do family and shares the expectations of many of his classmates that the achievement of college graduation will be rewarded with a car. He has already picked out the model he wants and communicated this with his parents. On graduation day, his proud father approaches him with his gift in hand. It is a Bible. Bitterly disappointed the young man casts aside the Bible and engages in a heated exchange with his father which leads to a lasting estrangement. Years later, after his father's death, the man – no longer young – is cleaning out his father's things and comes across the Bible carefully saved. He begins to look through it, and notices something tucked inside the pages. It is an envelope, discolored slightly with age. He opens it to find a picture of the car he had so wanted, ... and a check in the exact amount the car would have cost at the time. He begins to weep, thinking of all the lost years, the unnecessarily lost love between himself and his father.

The moral of this story is not that if you read the Bible all your material desires will be met. The point that is made here is what the father knew, that if we can keep our material desires framed within the context of a life of faith, within the God's stewardship of the good gifts which God gives us, then we can live the life abundant which God would give us, regardless of the material gifts we either have or do not have.

God's stewardship is the model for our own. We are called to place our own lives within the context of God's call. Our finances, our time, our energy, our skills and abilities, all come from God. Whether we use them well or not can only be seen in the context of what God calls us to do and be. God calls us to reach out to others, to live in love and sacrifice, to risk being scorned as impractical in our commitment to God's service and in our extravagant care for others. We are called to put God first in our lives rather than toss God the remnants of what is left over after we have served our own desires and expectations. We are called to put the life of Christ's body at the top of our priorities – of our monies, of our time, of our commitment.

Our heavenly father has given us a Bible, and also a Savior, and a community in which we can learn to live as children of God. On top of this, God has given most of us multiple

materials blessings as well. In fact, in comparison with most of the rest of the world, we are every one of us wealthy. In Jesus Christ, God asks us to place all that we have and are in the context of the Savior who came not to be served, but to serve. Before we ask for too much more of the glory of this world, perhaps we need to ask ourselves – can we drink the cup which Jesus drank, and be baptized with the baptism with which he was baptized? The truthful answer is that we – on our own – cannot. The good news is that we are not on our own. We have been baptized– or for those of us here who have not yet been baptized, we can be baptized into the Body of Christ through the Holy Spirit. This is a gift not to be despised. It is a gift which makes all else clearer in perspective.

God has given each of us the gift of life in Jesus Christ. How will we answer God in our stewardship of this gift?