

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
November 11, 2018
Title: Stewardship: A Way of Life
Scripture: Psalm 127:1-2
Mark12:38-44

I think I will always remember one Sunday morning worship in the first church where I was pastor. I had just announced the offering and as the plate was passed to her, a young woman sitting in the front pew, very deliberately put her offering in the plate. Normally I wouldn't have noticed, but she had a big smile on her face and she looked directly at me as she put two pennies in the plate.

Now, many years later, I don't remember her name, but what I do remember was that she was 17 years old and on her own. Her family life had been very complicated, and she had lived mostly below the radar but on her own since she was 15. She worked at a McDonald's restaurant about 4 miles from the one room that she rented, and she rode a bicycle everyday to get to and from work. If the weather was so bad that she couldn't ride her bicycle, then she walked.

The smile on her face was because she was excited that she had two pennies that she was able to put in the offering plate. She felt like her life was finally starting to come together and she believed that coming to know God had a lot to do with that. I had to fight back the tears as I looked at her. I knew that two cents would not make a difference in the finances of our church, but I also knew that in a very real way that she had given more than the rest of us in worship that day.

She wasn't thinking about our church budget when she put her pennies in the offering plate. She was giving an offering of gratitude that

was from the very bottom of her heart and she was thrilled that she was able to give two pennies.

As you might imagine, that morning, I thought about the story in today's gospel reading. I was seeing the story of the widow giving her two copper coins being acted out right in front of me – except that it was not an act. It was an absolute reality happening right in front of me, and I was given the gift of observing this sacred moment.

I have heard the story of this woman used in ways that seem to try to instill guilt in people. “This woman gave all she had. How do you compare? Surely you can give more.” I know that this is going to sound strange especially since today is Stewardship Sunday and in a short time, you will be invited to offer your pledge cards for 2019, but I believe that this story, this incident, is not primarily about money. This story is about a way of life and if you notice the cover of your bulletin, you will notice the proclamation that stewardship is a way of life.

Stewardship is not about a church budget, or even a personal budget, although being responsible means we should have a good idea of what we anticipate our expenses to be. Stewardship is not about how much you are giving to the church – although it is important for our financial people to be able to have a good estimate of what they expect the income of the church to be.

Jesus considered the way we use our financial resources to be very important. He talked about money more than about almost any other subject – and his focus was usually about how money affected the way we live our life and make decisions – in ways that make our lives fuller and faithful or in ways that derail us.

Stewardship is really about how we live our lives on a day to day basis. It is about the priorities in our lives and how our lives reflect those priorities. Stewardship is about whether the things we say are important are really the things that are most important in our lives. Do we give them lip service, or life service?

In the first part of today's Gospel, Jesus has challenged the religious authorities who walk around drawing attention to themselves and who show no concern for the very real needs of the socioeconomically poor around them. In many cases they had become more focused on the institution than on the people they were supposed to be serving. The Psalm for today underlines this concern. "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain."

It is a call, a reminder, a challenge, not only to the religious authorities of Jesus' day but also to us today. We are called to remember and to live in such a way that God really is the foundation of the church. The work we do is to be God's, not ours. When we become focused on institutional survival then we have lost sight of the vision and the mission to which we have been called. When that happens, we have become poor stewards – voicing one set of priorities but living a different set.

Stewardship as a way of life invites us to be willing to look at every area of our lives and ask what our life proclaims is really most important to us. I believe that when we truly live our lives with God at the center then everything else falls into place.

Some years ago, in a church I served, the Lay Leader and family were getting ready to move to another state. He was an outgoing, gregarious man and it seemed he was always at the church. There was no doubt that he loved God and that everything he did was part of his witness.

As we prayed about who our new Lay Leader should be, the name we came up with was someone who was very different in many ways.

When I spoke to him about becoming the Lay Leader, he quickly compared himself to the current Lay Leader in all the ways that he thought meant that he wouldn't measure up; in all the ways that he thought he wouldn't be able to do the same kind of job. There was one thing he didn't identify but it had been the main reason we were asking him to consider this.

Everything about his life gave witness to his love for God. His love for his wife, children and mother-in-law living with him was grounded in his love for God and the way he believed that God wanted him to love his family. His profession as a special education teacher was a witness to how he was living out his belief that God wanted him to love and care for those who are most vulnerable. There were a lot of demands upon his time and his energy, but he kept them well balanced because he approached every part of his life asking what God wanted him to do in that particular situation.

That meant that there were times when he would not be at a church event because he believed that God wanted him to be at his son's school event or because he needed to be sitting talking with his mother-in-law or going out to dinner with his wife. Rather than seeing or experiencing all of the good things in his life as being in tension and conflict with each other, he saw them all through his first priority which was to be faithful to God in all things. He understood that all his relationships and all his life was lived with God at the center.

We all have the same 24 hours a day available to us. How we fill those 24 hours varies widely. We have many good things in our lives and

sometimes we may feel as if we are being pulled in a million different directions.

I will confess to you that recently, I have been feeling this way. When I allow myself to become focused on the expectations that I have for myself or others have for me, it is easy for me to become frazzled and scattered. When I am very intentional about beginning every day with God, and staying connected with God throughout the day, then the decisions, the expectations, the priorities, fall in place much better. It is important that I invite and allow God to show me the best way to approach the things that otherwise threaten to drive me crazy.

Stewardship is a way of life. It is about how we use our time. It is about how we use our money. It is about how we love. It is about how we use the many gifts that God has given us. It is about making sure that God is at the center of our lives. It is about all the other good things in our lives forming a circle around our relationship with God and being seen from that center.

In the church the same thing is true. God is, or should be, the center of all that we are and all that we do. Our programs and our ministries should have as their purpose being faithful to God's call in our lives. Our Sunday School helps us teach our children about who God is and why it is important for God to be at the center of their lives. Our youth group helps to build on that but also helps our youth identify ways to put this into action.

A couple of weeks ago, we went to Aldersbridge to paint pumpkins with residents there. I doubt if there was much, if any, conversation about God during that event, but God's love was being shared and shown. Some of God's older children were given a gift of socializing, talking, being with people who loved them simply because they are God's children. It was

wonderful to see people of all ages together enjoying each other's company and knowing that God was at the center.

I pray that our time of worship together feeds our souls and also sends us out to serve God in every part of our lives. I pray that we hear God's call to serve those who are most in need and to help give a voice to those whose voices are often silenced. I pray that we go deeper in our faith, spreading our roots and producing more branches, leaves, and fruit.

Our administrative meetings are meant to focus on how we can use the resources we have – our building, our finances, our abilities – to best be a witness to God's love here in Lincoln, and in the larger world.

Stewardship is a way of life. It includes every part of our lives with God at the center providing direction, guidance, and meaning for all that we are and all that we do. Can we, like the woman in today's gospel, give ourselves to God and let God guide us in all the other decisions in our lives?