

The World's Worst Stewardship Sermon

John 20: 19-23, Acts 2: 1-21

Who listens to NPR, National Public Radio? What do you think about their fundraising efforts? Do you find them irritating? Are they necessary? How about exciting? What about fundraisers for schools? Do you love buying those coupon books and raffle tickets? How about our efforts to raise funds for the youth mission trips here at Crossroads? Are they okay because they are necessary? Sometimes it can be exciting to give money away, but I suspect, for the most part, it is not your favorite pastime to be asked to give money.

Everyone knows that not-for-profit organizations need to raise money. Churches ask their people to make financial pledges each year. We call it a stewardship campaign. Sometimes the campaigns are good. When campaigns are good, they can make people almost happy to be asked for money. Sometimes campaigns are bad. A bad stewardship campaign can help us appreciate a good one.

What makes for a really bad stewardship campaign? Maybe at the heart of such a campaign would be the world's worst stewardship sermon. What would such a sermon say? Can you help me organize the world's worst stewardship program you can imagine? We'll need a slogan. Let's find the ten worst slogans. Here are some examples:

- "Give or God will get you."
- "Anyone can give time and talent. We really want you money."
- "The pastor knows what you give anyway."
- "Whatever you give, God will reward you with more money."
- "Show us the money!"
- "You people just aren't giving enough!"
- "Give till it hurts."

Of course, the truth is we don't want a bad stewardship campaign. We want a good campaign, one that responds to your questions and offers each of you a chance to share your thoughts and your ideas. A good campaign would be something like what we're doing in our home-based stewardship discussions. In case you have not made it to one yet, they go something like this.

We would start off by asking what the role is of the church in the world. I'd want to know what the pastor thinks is the big picture of why there is a church. I feel certain the pastor would say that the church is in the world in order to change the world, to transform the world in partnership with the Spirit into God's vision of *Shalom*—God's values as Jesus taught them: peace, justice, mercy, liberty, and love.

As part of a good stewardship campaign, I'd want to understand the role of Crossroads Church within that larger vision? I expect to hear that Crossroads exists in order to change people, to transform people who will then change the world. I'd want to hear that this congregation believes, when people participate in the life of Crossroads Church, they experience transformation "on the journey." Because this church challenges and supports

people on their journey, the more new people are invited, welcome, and involved at Crossroads, the more transformation will take place – the greater our impact on the world. Finally, I'd want to hear that this congregation's goal is to be a community where people practice *Shalom*; where they work for justice and peace by being directly involved with organizations that work for justice and peace in the world.

The stewardship of community is an attitude that sees all life as a gift of time, talents, and treasures. We have a pretty consistent focus here on investing our time and talents. We are now focusing on the stewardship of our treasures. A good stewardship campaign would ask two fundamental questions. What do you believe God wants you to do with your life especially in the coming year? What does God want Crossroads to do as church especially this year? The question for financial stewardship is, "What does God want you to do to join in supporting the mission and vision of Crossroads Church for the coming year?"

Today is Pentecost Sunday. Pentecost was a Jewish festival marking fifty days from the beginning of Passover. By the first century, it was an occasion to celebrate the giving of the Torah to Moses on Mt. Sinai. As recorded in the New Testament book of Acts, the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost with lots of noise. That was the first Christian Pentecost because it marked the birth of the Christian Church.

Today, on this Pentecost Sunday, we're looking at another story of the giving of the Spirit. We might call it the quiet Pentecost. (read John 20: 19-23) What a day! It was evening on that first Easter Sunday. The doors of the house where the disciples met were locked for fear of the Jews. This was not all the Jews, but those leaders who were in charge of the Temple and in league with the Roman guard.

Jesus came and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you." He showed them his hands and side so they would know who he was. The disciples rejoiced. Jesus spoke again, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Then he breathed on them. "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained." The Spirit's presence in the disciples was the ongoing presence of Jesus who had the power to forgive. The Spirit teaches each of us that we have the power to forgive and also the power not to forgive with all that entails.

This event was not a private ordaining of a select group to hold power to themselves. This was a commissioning, a sending forth of these who knew Jesus intimately. Jesus was sending them forth to share good news and to convey the liberty of all the children of God.

Mother's Day is a wonderful celebration of motherhood, the value of mothers, and the values that mothers teach us. Mother's Day is also a powerful statement about stewardship, the investment of our lives in terms of the values of peace and justice -- God's *shalom*. The song *Bread and Roses* refers back to a strike in 1912 when women protested oppressive child labor. Julia Ward Howe, who wrote *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, wrote a Mother's Day proclamation in 1870 calling on "all women of all

nationalities to come together and reject [the idea that] any nation or any government has the right to teach one mother's child to kill another mother's child." In last week's Kansas City Star, Linda Staten encouraged women to speak out for peace. To do this is simply good stewardship of our relationships and of the precious gift of life, love, and family.

There is one last connection to make about stewardship. It is perhaps the most important to those of us who follow Jesus. There are two different versions in the New Testament of the giving of the Spirit. This reminds us that there are very different approaches to following Jesus and to living in the Spirit. In contrast to the noisy experience of the Spirit in Acts 2, Jesus gave the Spirit, in John's Gospel, directly to the disciples as quietly as breathing.

What do these two stories, representing the defining event at the beginning of the Christian Church, teach us about the stewardship of our lives and our treasures? The key is not how the Spirit is given or received, but the Spirit herself and why she comes to live in us. Like Jesus, the Spirit is God's investment in our lives. She is the gift of God that keeps on giving, teaching, enlightening, and empowering.

The life-giving Spirit is the presence of a transcendent God who is also personal enough to bring healing and build community. The Spirit is God being personal by partnering with each of us. God lives in you and God lives through you.

I want to invite you to exercise good stewardship in your life. Begin by considering these questions: How will I follow Jesus with my life? What does God want me to do with my life? What brings me to life? What do I most want to do in my life? Starting from there, our other choices become clearer.

I want to invite you to be part of a supportive, challenging, and loving community of faith – such as Crossroads Church. Be on your journey with intent and purpose in keeping with the vision represented by Mother's Day. Live by faith in the Spirit of Truth, the Spirit who is the breath of Jesus! With the Spirit living in us, let us be God's presence, God's breath, in our world in Jesus' name.