

April 23, 2017

Stewardship I: The Bountiful God

Matthew 6:25-34

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Happy Eastertide! Today we are lingering in the afterglow of the most high and holy day. Christ is risen, **Christ is risen indeed**. The smell of lilies is still in the air, even though they have been carried off to be buried so that they will **rise up** again next year...thank you Linda for **stewarding** them underground! We are all a "Chr-Easter" people, we tend to move toward the climactic moments in our faith stories that surround Christmas and Easter. Our churches are most full on these significant celebration days. We have favorite songs that we silence through Advent (don't sing about the baby yet) and Lent (hold the hallelujahs). Come Christmas Eve and Easter, we rattle the rafters. Today we are still singing the songs of triumph and we will, really, for the whole year. Unlike the beautiful Christmas songs that are tucked away in the hay after December and January, we sing the songs of our resurrection all year long for it is the story of our **faith**. **We rise up!**

Today we begin our **Stewardship** Celebration. The next four weeks will speak the glory of God and how it is manifested with this community and beyond. What a great call for all of us to take inventory and be inspired by the overwhelming evidence of our being in partnership with our bountiful God. Many of us invited guests to come for Easter, and these next four weeks will also be an awesome time to taste and see the goodness of the Lord. You're invited to drop in the **Growing through Giving** box out in the Narthex to record what it means to you to be a partner with God through stewardship. **Rise up**, and think inside the box.

Today is also Earth day. What a perfect and delightful time to weave both the Easter and Stewardship messages together in celebration of the very first gift God gave to us, the earth and all we creatures! What a bountiful God! This is an extravagant gift that is divinely designed to renew itself continually to God's glory and ours, with our partnering. God delights in its goodness, and said so! "It is good!" God delights in our delight of it! Whether the sun rises over a downtown apartment building or sets in a canyon, its beauty radiates. Whether splashed on the feet of a child on an African coast or a senior citizen in Florida, the ocean is a gift to all of us. This is the best gift we've ever gotten. Thank you God for the world.

We hear today, "Consider the lilies, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these." (Matthew 6: 28-29)

We are in relationship with the lilies. We appreciate their beauty. We take them for our own, we give them as gifts and we surrender the bulb back to the earth with full faith that we will see the flowering again. We didn't make the lily and we can't resurrect it, yet they are gifts to enjoy. I remember a conservationist teaching us ecological stewardship, telling us only to pick a wildflower when it is in a field with too many to count. Otherwise, look and leave it so that it can multiply itself. In our first spring of our first home we were delighted to see the long driveway lined on both sides with daffodils we hadn't planted and didn't know were coming. What a gift. One morning I looked out and half of them were gone. I thought a deer must have eaten them but deer don't like daffodils, they like lilies.

So here on Eastertide-Stewardship-Earth Day, let us take pause to consider all of these gifts and to celebrate.

The second greatest gift God shared with the world? Jesus! Let's linger in the story. There are some boulders to roll. I am so grateful that the stone was shoved off. It wasn't for Jesus' sake. Later he would walk in through locked doors! That boulder was rolled away for the humans to peek in and see. The women heading to the tomb are wondering if they are going to get around that boulder that blocks the entrance. It doesn't matter to them that they are going to hit a wall; they are going in faith. When they arrive, the stone was rolled away. Not by the guards, not by the hiding disciples, but by the power of God so that we would know God's mystery and partnership with us in seeing Jesus out and in the world.

God's partnering includes *holy, boulder rolling*. Sounds like a line from Batman. There are so many obstacles in the way of our rising up; boulders that we, in no way, have the strength to move ourselves. Boulders that pin us in, trap us, make us worry, anxious, hopeless, and keep us down, and fearful. Naturally so, if we think it is only by our own power that they can move. But time and again, we have known the boulder roll that lets even a single beam of light in on our darkness.

This is the season for God to rock and roll. This is the time to see a ray of light. This is Eastertide. Our hearts are so full of gratitude for the life and love of Jesus. Hopefully our hearts are lighter for whatever we carried and cast off during Lent in the shaping and suffering tides of ashes, honesty and repentance. We just have to come up out of the dark tomb. When Jesus stepped out, the world would never be the same. The veil had been torn. The Kingdom of God was revealed to humankind. Jesus has triumphed even over death. The world is changed and we have the call to be part of that change. This is what we call stewardship. This is what it means to partner with God as an overseer and protector of Christ in the world. So when we step out of the tomb or a box and into the light, how do we respond to the world with this new enlightenment? How do we partner with Jesus to be this change? We learn to share.

We know how it feels to see someone open a gift that you know they are going to love? It is great to see their appreciation, it is great to hear their thanks, and it is great to see them do something with it; take a bite, a sip, or put it on. Once I said thanks to God for something and I thought I heard God say, thank for saying thanks. God's joy must be even greater when we share the gifts or dare I say, become stewards or protectors of them. We are not always inclined to do so.

Comment [JO1]:

My grandmother sent me an entire, handmade, wardrobe for my Barbie when all I asked for was a wedding dress. Imagine my delight when there were even two wedding dresses for the doll. With the birthday package was a card and she wrote, "Now you have enough to share with Susie." My sister? "Oh no, these are mine." My mother set me straight. Sometimes we have to be set straight as to how to best consider the lilies without being childish. We rise up with our bountiful gifts in hand and we say, "Thank you!" What does it look like to **rise up** in real gratitude? It looks like sharing.

Sharing can be scary. It does, as the scripture warns, make us anxious. There is good reason. The kingdom of God needs to be painfully birthed from a tomb where people know the loss of jobs, of home, not having enough, care for our kids and grandchildren, caring for our aging parents, retirement, addictions, disease, pestilence, war, terror, disaster, poverty, too little time, too much. We are all stepping out of some fear. How do we emerge together in the light? Only by partnering with God. Our

worry and fret will only shut us down, not add one day to our lives or a ray to the light. It will be our moving in faith that will bring change to the world.

We need faith enough to know that Jesus' only chance with the world and with us is that we pray to be partners with God's power. We are God's creation who are to be and to work at finding the resources and support.

Why? Because we are so appreciative of all bountiful things that we did nothing to deserve.

How? By reflecting the outrageous generosity of God while trusting that we will not only move boulders, but we can be more than enough.

Here's the equation: God's Generosity + our Gratitude = Generosity.

Stewardship is sharing of our time, talents and resources. It's hard to let go of the anxiety that we won't have enough. Anxiety weakens our faith. And if you don't have enough to make your ends meet now, then this is your season to be blessed by the assistance of others who bring the kingdom; blessed until your mission and work of partnership on earth is restored.

There are people who die in the world trusting that God will provide, well there was enough in the world to take care of them, there just weren't the supports on the end of others, including ourselves, to feed, water and clothe them.

Right before today's reading, Matthew 6:33, Jesus tells us to seek the Kingdom of God...First! Set aside what will be your offering to the world, first...and then watch not only your needs be met, but also those of the hungry, thirsty and outcast. Towards the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells us how to love him in the world that is his kingdom. "Whatever you do for the least, you do for me." This is how we build the kingdom! Not by holding back in fear, look at the lilies and the birds, there is provision enough. Look at the silos we are building where rust and moths will ruin the storehouse that could have fed the world had we all reached out first.

The Disciples Ministries Special Easter offering from last week will take our support around the world from Asia to Latin America to the US homeland. Our stewardship offerings to the church not only support administration, building, and worship, but also greater than \$80,000.00 or a 10% tithe of our church operational budget goes to mission and outreach beyond our doors to the community and to the world. This is amazing. We have such a boast to make in God through the Spirit that is moving generosity through all of us in this place. We are a beacon of light coming out of the tomb in partnership with Christ. Thank you for sharing and for wrestling with your anxiety about how to give generously and gratefully. The soil from which our giving grows is gratitude. It is good to **rise up** in something bigger than ourselves. Generosity is a mystery that grows the personal, church, community and world as we build The Kingdom of God.

All good gifts come from or evolve from that which God started and continued through partnership with humankind. The gifts are on loan, we are on loan and we really have just a little life time to offer change and interest to the world. What if one of the questions Jesus is asking us is, "What did you change?" What will we have to say about how we stewards took the sin and sadness of the earth and transformed it to be revelation or a **rising up** of the Kingdom of God?

So about that first spring in our new home, the one with the daffodils lining the driveway? Our drive happened to be the bus stop. The next morning I looked out my peep hole and saw rest of the daffodils were gone. Then I saw them in the hands of the children boarding the bus and I thought, "It is good."