

Lesson: Ephesians 3:14-21

Psalm 145

Gospel: John 6:1-21

9th Sunday after Pentecost

July 25, 2021

“Stewardship of Life”

Sermon Preached by Rev. Lowell Nelson

American Lutheran Church of Sun City

Grace and peace be to you through our Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. The gift of life and stewardship go together -- the expression of our God-given resources, ourselves, our time, our talents and (I've been adding) our testimony, the message that we share with other people. All of these are gifts from God. I know some very generous friends who say “You can't out-give God.” It's another way to say that every, every, everything is a gift from God. Our joy is to reflect a portion to God's work, but simply put, *all* of our life is to reflect the love of Christ -- what we say, what we do, who we proclaim the message to, who we serve and love in Jesus' name – *everything* we do. It is the stewardship of life.

I felt much more effective speaking about money when I wasn't a pastor, but now you know that my salary comes through your generous offerings, your expression of your love for God. I take it as a great responsibility to honor what God is doing through this congregation, and I'm so fortunate to be part of this community of faith. How we respond to God's grace is deeply personal, or I'll say “the stewardship of life.” All the decisions we make are meant to open our life to God's grace. In our Ephesians reading Paul prayed “According to the riches of His glory may we be strengthened;” we have Christ dwelling in our heart as we are being rooted and grounded in love.

I call it three-dimensional living that we have with all the saints who have gone before, the breadth and length and height and depth – the love of God. It surpasses all knowledge that the stewardship of life is meant for our past, our present, and our future, all the dimensions of life, of creation, of those that we love, for those that we have yet to know. We are filled with the fullness of God's abundant love. Your life is shaped by the love of Christ. To Him be the glory! That is the foundational part of the stewardship of life, the glory of the kingdom and speaking of God's power.

Today's Gospel text has a variety of textures. I'm going to concentrate on the young boy with loaves and fishes. Stewardship is ‘caught’ more than it is ‘taught.’ We can go to stewardship classes; I can tell you about required minimum distribution for IRAs. (A great strategy is to give the distribution directly to the church and pay no taxes on your IRA gains). Those are things you can learn; that's being wise. But I'm talking about the fundamental nature of being generous, something that for most comes early. Who was the generous person in your life who opened up your eyes to understand that everything is a gift? We share our gifts to honor the gift giver. I remember learning about my parents' sacrificial giving to the church when I was a teenager. To be honest, it was stunning to me and made me angry. When I confronted my dad “why are you giving so much to the church instead of me?” he said “It's who we are.” It's a matter of identity to be able to share.

The little boy in the Gospel story was taught a tremendous lesson. His mommy packed a big lunch of two fish and five barley loaves, more than he needed, so that he could share. Sometimes we need a reminder that our life is abundant and that our very life is a gift from God. I sometimes forget about living in the greatest country in the world; I forget about what it means to be a member of this church and its long legacy of love and generosity. Maybe that's how it went, that Andrew said to the unnamed little boy “You've got a lot” and he was encouraged to share. Then Jesus brought a center of focus,

having the people sit down to eat. We're all in this together, not a bunch of people wandering through life, but people together, praying prayers of thanksgiving over what has been given.

Today we refer to "asset-based" giving; instead of looking at all of our problems we look at all our gifts. Start with the gifts in mind. Another way to describe this is that instead of negative inquiry (why are we struggling so much?), we use appreciative inquiry: What are all the gifts and resources we have that we are able to build upon for the ministry of the church? These past 18 months have been bizarre. For our own stewardship here in the church, many of us have not re-engaged at the levels of previous generosity. I'm sure there are plenty good reasons why that is, but they're not generous reasons. We can do it! We can step back into the spirit of generosity when we recapture the imagination of God's love for you and remember that everything is a gift, an authentic action. I use the word 'authentic' to mean taking that step, not giving because of compulsion or because Pastor Nelson is saying it. It is because the author of life invites you into this life of blessing. When you personally make this decision, perhaps with your spouse, you work together and say you're going to reflect the love of God.

We're getting back on track and taking authentic action. The future may not be known but we know in whose hands we are placed so gently and lovingly. It's in God's hands that we move forward together. The young boy released his gifts, creating a tidal wave of blessings, multitudes of people releasing their gifts for the sake of the community with excess left over in 12 baskets. (12 is a symbolic number of the blessings of God – 12 apostles, 12 tribes, all through scripture a blessing number.)

Please join me in returning to your levels of generosity, because it's a way to reflect the love of Christ. It's a way to reflect asset-based or appreciative inquiry, as opposed to negative problem solving (what are our problems and how do we solve them?) I encourage you and me to be people who move with the love of God in purposeful action, authentic action, three-dimensional living – with our hearts and our minds, our checking accounts, all aspects of an abundant life. The Gospel message is that of unleashing generosity and blessings. That life of faith is your individual choice, reflected in the cascading momentum of the stewardship of life; when we join together we make this covenant.

As we look forward to the return of our church life – concerts, recitals, Wednesday Night Alive, the joy of worshipping together, the choir singing -- we'll continue to make wise decisions in the midst of this pandemic concern. But we're not going to be limited by the seas that are roiling around us and making us scared. We are people who are confident in Christ. Christ is with us. I thank God for this precious unnamed boy, maybe eight years old or so, who was taught by his mommy how to be generous, how to release, how to be part of the movement of God. And that's you and me. This 'stewardship of life' is a way to say that we are connected by the love of God. We are part of an abundance of life itself.

Let's return to our previous levels of generosity for the sake of this world. Let's return to this movement of God that is a blessing to all. I ask this, confident in the grace and abundant love of Christ. Amen.