

“Sparked by the Spirit”
Sermon Preached by Lowell D. Nelson
American Lutheran Church of Sun City

Grace and peace be to you through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Sparked by the Spirit – I want to join in the festivities of kicking off our stewardship program for this year by wearing one of my favorite stoles that has every single color of the liturgical season in it. It has a little bit of green, we are still in the season now of ending up Pentecost; but I can cover every base wearing this one. More importantly, it is just a sign of celebration. A celebration of speaking about stewardship.

Some people, they hear the word *stewardship* and they tighten up. They think of it as “fund raising”. They think of it as money, but we as disciples of the Lord Christ, we think of it as our life. It is life management, it is stewardship of life. Yes, that includes financial resources, but it is not limited to that. The stewardship discussion is meant to be a time for us to grow in faith and to encourage one another. Some of the essentials of stewardship, they almost have to be caught, not simply taught. You have to hit the heart, not just simply here, not as a strategy, but the reconnection, the deep connection with the Lord and with one’s intent, and then encouragement with other people. It is deeply more emotional than just a strategy.

I do not know how you learned about stewardship in your life. The Psalms speak of this “Lord, you have been our refuge from one generation to another.” This accurate and descriptive phrase, “You turn us back to the dust and say turn back o children of earth.” The generations that have come before us, those saints now in heaven supporting and encourage us on. I pray that you had someone teach you about stewardship.

I was very fortunate. I was at the peak of my intellectual powers, at the peak of physical health. I was about 15 years old. Nothing better than a 15-year old. I discovered a check on the table in our kitchen. It was a check made out to the church where my dad served as pastor. The check was, I thought quite a bit of money, but what was scandalous to me was the memo line which said, *weekly offering*. I remember seeing that – weekly, this means weekly? I remember taking that check, holding it as evidence, on a Saturday, which is when I found it, Saturday afternoon, I took it into my dad’s office where he was preparing for Sunday’s sermon. I did not knock, just went right in. I said something to the effect “I demand an explanation!” I was so righteous. I still remember that. He looked at me and he said, “That is our offering.” I said, “How can you give this much money to the church?” This is the answer where he taught me, not here (head), but here (heart); he said, “It is who we are.” All I remember is hearing that, I was deflated, I did not know what to say. Silently, I just turned around and laid it back on the table. That message

resonated with me, it was not a strategy, it was not out of guilt; it was a statement of relationship. It is who we are in this beautiful journey of life with the Lord whom we trust, Jesus Christ, power of the Spirit to infuse us, sparked by the Spirit.

The generations, one essential for stewardship is what you are doing for stewardship in your life which needs to be shared with the next generation, and the next generation. There is nothing better than to teach our young people that it is who we are. We are generous because of the generosity of God. We reflect that generosity. We join together in generosity so that we can expand our ministry, far more than the individual transaction, we are united. Friends and sisters here, do not keep it a private matter. It is a way to bring a marriage together, to share the intent and the goal, and the dream of reflecting God's generosity together. It just cascades. Share stewardship with others, help them feel and experience this living relationship far more than giving to a budget.

First Thessalonians speaks of not worrying so much, this phrase you have heard it, "Like a thief in the night." The Lord is not a thief, it is just a metaphor to say you did not see it coming, you do not know when it is coming, you do not know when the Lord is coming. But that has nothing to do with it. We are not acting in ways that are guilty and then we want to know the Lord's coming and we are going to try to get it all together. Christ died for us, we have been set free. We live as the phrase says, "as people of the day", in the light, nothing secret. So, in this joy, the breast plate of faith and love and the helmet of hope of salvation because God has not destined us for wrath. We are people with an incredible confidence in the work of Jesus Christ. We elevate the work of Christ, Christ has taken all burden and allows us to be free in our response. This encouragement for one another and to build up each other as indeed you are doing as he says to the people in Thessalonica, that is our call here in Sun City, and for the west valley is to encourage and build each other up. It is uniquely personal, the stewardship essential, right? I mean you are not giving it for somebody else.

I have teased people that said, "Pastor, I won't be able to be there, can you just put my card in for me?" I said, "I'll do you one better, I'll even fill it out for you." That is pastor humor, but what I am trying to say is "it is deeply personal." Right? It is not something we put up and everybody compares, that is not what it is about. But the more people that engage in estimates of giving of statements of intent, the old word used to be *pledge*. This is my encouragement to you, the studies show that the people who make a statement of intent for the next year, on average, over a lifetime, give eight times more money to the mission of Jesus Christ than those who don't, who approach each one, each week, each month as *what do I have left over to give?* A statement of intent is a stewardship essential, it is part of life. Of course, it makes sense, doesn't it – to set a goal and to align yourself accordingly. Our congregation has wonderful room to grow in our statements of intent, whether one is an associate member, or a regular member, whether you spend all the time here or time in other congregations, I encourage you to have statements of intent to the congregations in which you participate. It is wonderfully motivating when our congregation can move forward and not just have a portion of us, but a vast majority. Here is a standard – the previous congregation that I served at, it was not my doing, it was part of their legacy – 90% of

the people pledged. That was a statement of intent. I just encourage you to build up our church by joining with others, encourage one another to entrust our response to the grace of Jesus Christ.

The last stewardship essential is knowing the character of God. That is a broad topic of course, but for today I just want to say it this way. This Gospel message, and again as a pastor, it is kind of interesting when there is a very strong judgment at the end of the Gospel reading, I say “Thanks be to God.” I can normally see people are kind of frowning saying where is the good news? The good news is that there is a Kingdom of God and that we are called to engage in it. We are not alone. Our Master, our Lord, our Savior, and the term servant just describes the role. We are not the master, we are servants of God. We are slaves, the other way to interpret that word, we are beholding, but that is not a restriction, that is showing the closeness of relationship in our alignment. God loves us.

Going back to 1 Thessalonians, he did not destine us for wrath. This sermon can always talk about double your money. Right, the one who had five got five more. The one who had two, got two more. This sermon is not about money in this regards, it is in this way to encourage you to live. Do not hold back in your living. Your dreams, your aspirations, your desires are important. Your God given discernment of where you should be and how and what you should be doing are important. Engage in life. Use the talents and skills and the resources, including your finances, in alignment to the purposes of God.

For our congregation, we align to three purposes in our mission statement. First is to proclaim – we are going into 2021 proclaiming, especially through our music ministry with Dr. James Gerber, joining Janet McDonald. They are having so much fun, I tease them that we shouldn’t even pay them, it just seems like it is just a great delight. They do not agree with that, but it is joy to see the proclamation of our love for the Lord in the music ministry, and we are going full bore in 2021. Your involvement with this church will make that come true. We seek to be a blessing to others in what we say and what we do. We have great goals to expand our relationship with the synod and Pan De Vida, our Hispanic ministry, and of course to continue with the Navajo mission. We are blessed to be a blessing here. We have such tremendous goals. Together we can make this difference.

Lastly, it has been a struggle, I have to admit. How do you invite people to a worship service that is limited due to our concern to be safe and to protect one another? Wonderful news I am hearing, but the vaccine is not yet here; but I know 2021 is going to open up, there is no doubt of that. But as we regain our ministry momentum, we continue to love, to encourage one another. The Stephen Ministry is a positive example. Our neighborhood groups and how they love and support one another. I am going to plant a seed – we can encourage one another. By the end of the year of 2021, 11, 12 or 13 months from now, I would love for us to take on the debt of this congregation and to pay that off over a three-year period. Together we can open ourselves. The reason I say that, why should we do that? Because we would open up hundreds of thousands of dollars a year for new ministry, not the service of debt, but to encourage and for a way to burst into our 50th anniversary year in 2025. What I am trying to say to you is that is the life of this congregation,

that is your life, you want to be aligned to a missional purpose – to love your family, love your Lord, to love your country, to love your neighbor; do not play it safe like the person who buried it all in the ground. He had a total misreading of God, basically said this money – I don't want it, I don't want to be involved with it, I'm putting it into the ground. That is a metaphor to me, many of us who struggle about how to engage in life. This is a spark by the Spirit, it is not just money, it is about your life to align to missional purposes.

All these things put together, the essentials of knowing the power of learning about stewardship and sharing that in family situations I think is the best. I encourage you to share such things. This encouragement for one another, yes deeply personal, but when we begin to act in ways of alignment to this mission and we take steps towards being an estimate of giving congregation where we step forward and make our intents known is very powerful for us and for the mission of this world. Lastly, the world needs you. The world needs you fully alive. The world needs our church, fully engaged in mission. This is what 2021 is about. Sparked by the Spirit, we will proclaim, we will bless and we will invite. Stewardship essentials, the love of God, a mission purpose, and joining with others. Amen