

This is not primarily a story about money. I understand that with a title that begins with the word *stewardship*, you might expect we will talk about money, and you'd be right – to a point. However, allow me to point out that the second word in the title, *redux* means recovered, or brought back.

You might be asking, “recovered from what?” The answer is the idea that stewardship is primarily about money, for starters.

You know what season it is. It's tired preacher joke season. Every year I tell one of two, either, of Dr. Jean Milner, who was credited with preaching on stewardship at Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis by climbing into the pulpit, and declaring, “The Session has asked me to speak to you about the budget. I consider the matter handled’.” Or else I say, “Good news, we have all the money we need to run the church. Bad news, it's still in your pockets.”

End of sermon.

If money is all we are here to talk about, then truly, it is the end of the sermon. But it's *not* all we are here to talk about. Money is an aspect of stewardship, but it is not the only aspect, and it is not even the most important, as far as I can tell.

We need to take as a starting point, though, not the concept of *stewardship*, but rather the story itself. It would be easy enough to take proof texts and build a case for emptying your pockets. But that would be treating stewardship again as being about nothing but money, and it's not. Think of the Biblical images you hear associated with stewardship, of tithes and first fruits, of widow's mites and the psalmist's declaration that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. All of these are wonderful images, scriptural and rich

with meaning in our common life. But typically, they funnel us back into the mindset that stewardship is primarily about money. And it's just not. Stewardship is about vocation and our whole lives. There is not an aspect of Christian life that doesn't come under the concept and the discipline of stewardship.

Given this relationship, I take as our text today the assigned lectionary Gospel reading, which conveniently enough for me, seems at least at the outset to be about money.

You had a part yourself in its reading this morning: the story is simple: a rich person came to Jesus asking what he had to *do* to inherit eternal life. Jesus replied with a portion commandments that in the scheme of the Decalogue are the ones that deal with how to live together in community: don't murder, don't steal, don't lie, don't deceive people, and don't dishonor people's relationships with adultery, and take care of your parents in their old age. These commands are all about living in community, not about grasping at some far off concept of life after death. Pay attention: when Jesus was asked about eternal life, he responded by describing how to live *now*. The young man had done all these things, and the text said that Jesus loved him.

This was a *good* person. If it weren't for the fact that the story tells us he was rich, we would likely not even think of money. In fact, I suspect we think pretty well of this fellow until we find out that he doesn't want to give up his stuff.

That's why it's easy to think this is about money, but it is not. This is a story about missed vocation. It's about squandered opportunity.

And then as if to make matters worse, Jesus decides he needs to comment on this failure. There is nothing quite like having Jesus comment on your failure to rub salt into an open wound. And his remarks seem yet again to make this a story about money. But it still

isn't. Even with Jesus' remarks on how hard it is for the wealthy to enter the kingdom, it is still a story about missed opportunity. What Jesus' remarks about the kingdom appear to have in common is a thread that goes like this: if you think you can keep doing things exactly the way you have been doing them, then you are not going to find the kingdom, because if that worked, you'd already be there.

If you think you can exert minimal effort and expect to fall into the kingdom, you're going to miss it. Vocation requires effort, change and constant seeking. If we strip away the aspects of money and ritual purity and law keeping and stick with his substance, Jesus seems to say that the kingdom of God is an elusive, difficult to find, even harder to keep, *state of being*. It is much more than a commodity, and we won't get it on our own, only with God's help.

Which, from a "practical minded, nuts and bolts, mechanics of faith standpoint," is completely unhelpful.

At least Peter thought so.

I once heard Brian Blount preach on this text once and when he came to the part of Peter, Brian changed the tenor of his voice just ever so slightly, so that Peter's response took a different tone:

Look, Lord, we *have* left everything and followed you.

Do you hear it? Exasperation, frustration, disbelief. We *have* left everything and followed you. And now you tell us that it is so hard to reach the kingdom of God that we may as well throw up both hands and walk off. What more do you want?

And I wonder sometimes if Peter is alone in this feeling. I don't think so.

What about you? Do the *demands* of discipleship seem sometimes never to stop?

I imagine that Peter's backtalk was born out of just such frustration: Lord we *have* left everything and followed you. My wife is living with my mother in law, nothing good every came of that, my boat is in dry-dock, my feet are tired, I'm hungry, I don't know from day to day where I'm going to sleep, all these different homes and different meals are wreaking havoc on my gut, the dog has done his business on the floor, the children are screaming, I forgot to go to the store for supper, and all we have are Eggo waffles and tuna. Look Lord, I need a little more from you than tirade about rich people and the kingdom of God.

And Jesus seems in the moment to sense Peter's need to know that it's *worth* it, that the end result is going to be *worth* what he has given up to follow him, and so he turns around and in a brief moment of encouragement he says, it's *worth* it, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake or the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age – houses, brothers and sisters mothers and children and fields - with persecutions – and in the age to come, eternal life."

That's a pretty good deal, a *hundredfold*, if he just would have left out the persecutions.

And as Brian said, that's kind of not like saying, "with a cherry on top."

You're going to leave house and family and your job and follow Jesus and you're going to get it all back, now and in the kingdom, but there are going to be persecutions along the way.

It's going to be worth it, but it's going to be work.

Let me ask you, what is Jesus *really* saying about money and possessions here?

You know, Jesus talks a lot about stewardship. And actually, he says a lot about money too, but when he does so, he's not running an annual campaign and he's not building a budget when he does it.

And here is the important part: neither are we. We will do it because it's good practice, but it is not our purpose. The minute that money becomes anything other than a means to an end, we've got a big problem as a church.

And let me extend this caution to you: that's true for you too.

You know how Paula Deen says, "I'm your cook, not your cardiologist?" Well, I am not saying, "I am your preacher, not your financial planner."

I am not saying that because anything I say to you, I have to say to myself first. So let me be clear: I don't want, and this I really mean, to extend some nauseating prosperity gospel where I imply that A) God's intent for everyone is wretched excess, and B) that if you tithe God's going to assure that you get it, and C) that if you pray hard enough you will be blessed with piles of money. When we talk about stewardship, we are talking a way of life of following Jesus.

This is where stewardship redux can occur. It's about looking honestly at our spiritual lives and knowing God can strengthen us if we'll be honest about where the weaknesses are. If we're giving at the level we care how the money is used, that's great. Not to put too fine a point on it, but if your church giving is making the difference between whether you can go to St. Thomas for vacation but not Fiji, that's great, because it means you know what it cost you. But if it makes the difference between or not your child gets piano lessons or you fill a prescription, it's too much. Let someone who just canceled a trip to Fiji carry the weight for you. And it's not because *I'm* saying so, it's because

Jesus says that where your money is, your heart is. But let us press further. It used to be that I could say to you, “Look at your bank statement and you’ll know what is most important to you.” I’m not sure I believe that anymore, though. Look at your calendar – that will tell you where your heart is.

The biblical image of the steward begins as early as the first chapters of Genesis and there is nothing in there about money. From the very beginning we are told that the Lord has given dominion over the earth to humankind. And a right understanding of stewardship understands that God has given us this dominion, not by right of our opposable thumbs but because we alone among creation have been made in God’s image, created to be *caretakers* and *caregivers* of what God has given, including our very own lives. That dominion has been sinfully corrupted in our understanding with catastrophic results on occasion. Stewardship rightly understood recovers what it means to care for creation.

As the creation narrative unfolds in Genesis, God creates a people, among all the peoples, who are uniquely entrusted with the care of pointing to God. These are the Hebrew people and God calls them into being for the stewardship of the covenant, so that all the people of the earth: pagan, secular, sinful and broken can see through this people a glimmer, a glimpse of who God is. They are the stewards of the mysteries of faith. In time, God brings one person, the Christ out of this people, Jesus, who is the steward of all creation and all mystery and all faithfulness to God, and it is to him that we turn our attention regarding our right place in the world.

The story of the steward is a grand epic of care and creation and ourselves, of redemption and calling and it is to our whole lives.

I am, from time to time, asked what my vision is for the church, and the truth is, it's incredibly simple. It's that we be church in the fullest sense of the word. That means following Jesus.

That sounds simple, and at one level it is, but at a deeper level, it is *so* not. Could you, with Peter make the audacious claim of having pointed your priorities solely toward following Jesus?

I cannot. I'm a work in progress. And so are most of you, I suspect. In our progress toward the kingdom, rethinking stewardship is a step. And there are baby steps along the way toward realizing it. Do you think stewardship is only about money? Stop there. It's about *time* and caring for the environment and minimizing the practice of taking more than our share. Do you think that giving is a pittance and the church is like all other takers with its hands out? Stop there. Done the way God wants it, giving is a spiritual discipline whereby we look seriously at our priorities and make decisions about what is most important. Look at your giving and be honest with yourself and you will know what to do.

I think Christians oftentimes get hung up on the tithe. Sure, it would be fantastic if we all truly gave ten percent. We'd have to form a committee to give away the money because there would be so much more than we could use if this whole congregation tithed. But the truth is that Christian practice has always been faithfully across a spectrum – because our lives are not identical. And that's the truth of faithful stewardship: *we live with who we are, and where we are, and what helps us to embrace wholeness.*

If money is your weak spot and you find you are living only for yourself, go there. If time is your weak spot and you can't catch a breath, go there. If taking care of yourself is your weak spot, go there.

Because living in the kingdom isn't about guilt or fear or resentment. It is about taking our place in God's good creation as the children God made us to be.

I don't ever like to use Stewardship illustrations because of the fear that I have that it will seem to make one person's experience normative for how we all ought to relate to God, and that just isn't so. But I do want to remind you of an image. You see it every year.

Because we have to deal with nuts and bolts and so you, the congregation makes pledges of what you are going to do the next year. I've never known even a hint as to what that is. But it's like a miracle to me. Because I sit up here behind the pulpit and I get a privilege of seeing people come forward to place their pledge cards in the basket. And I watch couples come up together, each holding a corner of the card, and together make their commitment. I see people come through the line, that well, I know aren't really crazy about each other, don't really agree on much, and they put their cards in the same basket, committing themselves, for once, to the same cause. I see children put their cards in with their parents. And don't you think for even one second that the cause is *just* Morningside Presbyterian Church the look on your faces tells me otherwise. I can't describe it but its clear to me, that what we are doing together is seeking the kingdom of God, and it is the kingdom of God to which we are committing ourselves.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.