

November 13, 2016 - Stewardship Sunday II
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Luke 21:5-19

Three Sermons

Instead of one sermon today, I have three. But each on their own they're all relatively short, and they're all on the same topic, they just each have a different angle, or are aimed at a different audience. So just listen to the part that fits you, then it's just a third of a sermon. The topic of the sermon/s will hopefully not be a surprise—not if you have been reading the bulletin or received an envelope from the church with a letter and a form and an invitation to a meal next Sunday. The topic of the sermon is stewardship, or in less churchy and more frank terms: money, the money we put in the offering plate. Stewardship, money, can be a tough topic—but not nearly as tough as today's gospel. That gospel strikes me in a particular way after last week's tumultuous election, what with its predictions of unrest, portents, conflicts within one's family or country. But this sermon is not about that, this sermon is about stewardship.

The first sermon, the first angle into stewardship is an internal one; the first audience is anyone curious about spirituality, anyone who believes in intangible and immeasurable and important things like integrity and meaning and depth. Some may think it sounds odd that something as uncouth as money affects matters of the soul, but we have it on good authority—on God's authority. Jesus often mentions—not just mentions, Jesus prominently features money in his stories and sayings and teachings. Even more than we do in church, Jesus regularly and unabashedly takes up the topic of money—and its effect on our relationship with God. Jesus, God in human form, affirms that we are formed by what we do with our finances. This may sound daunting, but only when we stay stuck in the negative, only if we think that money is evil and Jesus is out to condemn us. But that is not the God we know, nor the Bible verse we know. Money is not intrinsically bad, the love of it is. Money can lead to evil, but also offers a remarkable opportunity. Stewardship, giving money away and to God's work, can be a way to be faithful. Not just faithful as in regularly giving offering, but faithful as in trusting, believing, living in a way of hope and trust and confidence. If you want to become a person defined by that, if you want to become a deeper person, stewardship is for you. One of the simplest ways—not the easiest way—but one of the most straightforward ways to grow in faith is to grow in giving. If you are wondering what you can do to cultivate an inner life, if you want to connect with a higher purpose, make giving a practice, pledge. Stewardship helps us experience what it means to be faithful.

A second sermon, a second angle into stewardship is a practical one; a second audience is anyone who thinks about numbers, about feasibility and operations—and anyone who doesn't. Stewardship recognizes the practical implications and realities of being here, together, in this place, on this or any other Sunday morning. Every Sunday, and on many other days, too, our doors are open. Practical things like your offering make this possible. One of my pastoral colleagues works with a congregation that has a lot of millennials. It is a vibrant, reverent, growing congregation, but it has its challenges, too. This teeters on ageist stereotyping, but my colleague says that one of the challenges of working with a younger generation, or with newer people, or with people who aren't as familiar with the ins and outs of church, is they don't know how the church does what it does. They may know more about how much it costs to have a cell phone or to be a member of a gym than to have a church. So this church decided to lean in to the

practical, to do more to inform people. As part of their stewardship campaign this church said, “Grace is free, but church costs money.” We are all invited to take ownership of this; stewardship is thoroughly democratic. We’re all invited to give. We do it in different ways, because we’re all in different circumstances. Maybe health issues have wreaked havoc on your finances, or changes in employment. Or maybe you have children in college, or children in daycare, or maybe it is your parents who need care. When thinking about stewardship there are any number of practical matters to take into consideration. One of them can also be the impact this place has on you—and on more than you: the impact, the practical effect this place has on a community, on generations. Many, many people give to this church so that it can continue to be here not just for themselves, but for others. Many, many people give incredibly generously here, so that others can find an open door, here.

A third sermon, a third audience is anyone who has had a door opened for them. I’m not talking about if any of our greeters went above and beyond this morning, though hats off to them, if they did. I am talking about other kinds of doors, I’m a thinking about doors that have been opened for me: when something that had been completely closed off to me, was opened up for me, by something outside of me, and I was able to walk into a whole new place, a whole new way of being, a new kind of life. Have you ever had that happen to you? Maybe a door was opened through an act of encouragement, or an introduction, an act of kindness. Someone accepted you, accepted your application, took you on, gave you a chance, hired you, promoted you. Or a door opened to you through a relationship, a door opened in you when someone said to you, “I love you.” Or: “I forgive you.” We hear those words, here, in church, we hear them from God: “I love you.” “I forgive you.” That is what God says to us. That is what God does for us. God is always opening doors for us, in us. God opens even the door of the tomb, rolls away the stone and says to us, “Live in a new way.” The third audience is anyone who has heard that, the third angle into stewardship is to respond to that, to live with the recognition of who God is and what God does, to live a life of thanksgiving, to be grateful.

Faithful, practical, and the third word: grateful—but really the first one, the primary one, because being grateful reorients our whole worldview. In the end, this is the great thing about stewardship: it reminds us, it frees us, to say what is first. What is first? God is first. The practice of stewardship asserts that no matter the uproar: wars and rumors of wars, cries that the end is coming, no matter who leads the nation, we trust in something greater. Temples fall, the gospel says. Hatred abounds. Make up your minds to live in another way. You have been given the words and a way to do so. With all we are, and all we have been given, testify.