

What is Stewardship, Really?

11/18/18: Mark 12:38-44

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Sermon-in-a-Sentence: Stewardship is about shifting the focus from ourselves to focusing on our faith community and loving our neighbors.

Adult Sermon

What is Stewardship, really? I've been preaching about Stewardship for 20 years; I should have figured it out by now. But I recently had a new "epiphany," a new sense, a deeper sense of what **Stewardship** really means and looks like.

As most of you know, I grew up Southern Baptist, and I was taught by my parents as a child to tithe, to give to the Church at least 10% of my income. I started out tithing from my weekly allowance as a kid. I don't remember exactly what my allowance was when I was 7 or 8, but I'm guessing around \$2 a week. So every Sunday, I would put two dimes in the offering plate when it was passed down our isle.

I've continued tithing pretty much all my life. There were a few times when I was in a financial crunch, but for the most part, I've continued to tithe to support my church. You have given me a very generous salary of \$101,000 a year, and I've always given back a tithe of 10%. A few years ago, I increased my pledge to \$12,000 a year, to include Julie's salary.

Tithing is one of the ways I have stayed very connected to the Church most of my life. In our Church today, and in the Episcopal tradition, we don't have as many tithers as we used to. But we are blessed with some of our most wealthy parishioners giving even more than a tithe, to support and sustain our faith community.

And, as I've mentioned in the past, most churches from all different denominations are struggling with their budgets. More and more big donors, or tithers, are aging out. And in most churches, fewer and fewer younger generations are attending.

We are blessed to have had a good influx of younger families in the last couple of years. But many of the younger generations are not able to tithe, to give 10% of their income, as they struggle to have a home and care for and support their children.

So what are we supposed to do to sustain Rec, and sustain the Church? How do we make Stewardship work in this changing world?

As most of you know, I flew to Boston last week to go bow hunting with my son, Seth. Seth has scouted out dozens of public land sites around Boston and in southern New Hampshire, and we hunted 4 afternoons and 4 mornings, mostly in swampy areas. We had a great time, but it was not easy. I had to wear waders, and I fell a few times, and sometimes got water in the waders.

And, I was so ***blessed*** to spend so much time hunting with my son. But I was ***blessed*** even more spending time living in his intentional community. Seth has been living in intentional communities for about 6 or 7 years, since he graduated from college, with his theology degree. (I thought he was going to become an Episcopal priest, but he went a different direction.)

There are currently six young adults living in the two-story apartment where Seth and Libby live. They live together as a big family, sharing meals, sharing rent, sharing utilities, sharing groceries, sharing taking care of their home. Like Seth, they are all engaged with nonprofits and ministries focused on social justice issues and helping the needy.

Seth's focus is on training social justice groups on how to build power, to build support and participation, so they can serve those who are struggling and suffering. As I've mentioned before, Seth is now coaching Richard Rohr's staff at the Center for Contemplation and Action. He has a regular 1 ½ hour phone call each week with their Executive Director, and he's done trainings in New Mexico, I think, three times.

The group Seth lives with, and other friends who gather with them, are all focusing on trying to serve and help others serve those in our world who are struggling and suffering. They are trying their best to actively love their neighbors, and they make loving their neighbors their **primary focus**.

None of them make enough money to live independently. But because they live together and work together, and share their lives, they are able to spend **most of their time, energy and money** on loving their neighbors, especially the neediest.

While I was there, we got to celebrate Seth's 29th birthday. About 20 of his friends showed up for dinner, most of whom are also working in social justice areas. Afterwards we sat together in the living room we started by doing some chanting, and then we went around the room sharing stories of how Seth has been a blessing in our lives. Of course, I cried.

After each of us told our story, we were invited to sing a song or lead a chant that resonated with our story of Seth's love and support for each of us. I shared my story of how much my son has stretched me and helped me see the world through a different lens. He has shown me what it means to really sacrifice and stretch to love our neighbors. Here's the song I played by Ziggy Marley, and they all joined in singing the chorus. [Love is My Religion]

Ironically, I spent almost a week living in Seth's intentional community; the week before I was supposed to preach about Stewardship. What I saw and experienced was a model of **Stewardship** that blew my mind.

I had already picked this Gospel reading before I went to Boston. When I came home and read it again, it slapped me in the face. Seth and his intentional community reminded me of the poor widow, in our Gospel reading, who gave ***all*** she possibly could. And they reminded me of Jesus and his disciples – how they lived and worked together to support each other so they could focus even more on loving their neighbors.

But then when I heard the first paragraph of our Gospel, pretty much describing **me**: “As [Jesus] taught, he said, ‘Beware of the scribes (*i.e. the priests*), who like to walk around in long robes, (*flip my robe*) and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues (*point out my seat*) and places of honor at banquets! (“*I always get to sit at the front*”) They devour widows’ houses (“*Most of our budget goes to salaries, and I have by far the biggest of our staff.*”) “and for the sake of appearance say **long** prayers (“*How long is our service?*”). **They** (*the scribes and priests*) will receive the greater **condemnation.**”

I am supposed to be a disciple of Jesus, following the Jesus Way. I should be doing Stewardship the way Jesus describes it. But given my generous salary and status, I sound more like the scribes in our Gospel reading. I will probably never find a way to live in an intentional community that would free me to spend **most** of my time and resources serving my most needy neighbors. But I am now asking myself the Stewardship question, “How **can I** give more? What is the next step I could take to give more of my time, resources and energy to **loving my neighbors?**” . . . Loving my neighbors -- the thing that Jesus said was second only to loving God. “How can I better follow the example of my son, and his wife, Libby, and his community friends?”

Stewardship is not just about filling out a pledge card, although that is an important part of supporting our faith community, and I hope you all will do so. Stewardship is really about looking at the Big Picture of our lives, and imagining ways I could sacrifice more to love and support my neighbors and my faith community, even more.

Stewardship is not easy. None of us are perfect stewards, especially your head priest. And that’s the challenge of Stewardship Season. “How can I, and my family, how can we, **stretch a little further**, to love and support my faith community, and our efforts to reach out and serve our neighbors, especially the neediest among them? Most of us can’t give 50, or 60 or 70% of our time and energy and resources, to loving our neighbors, like my son and his friends. But maybe we **could** find a way to focus **more** of our time and resources on loving and serving our neighbors; maybe I could **increase** my pledge to 14 or 15% of my generous salary, to support my faith community and our ministries for our neighbors?”

So what is Stewardship, really? I have a new answer based on my recent experience: It’s about **stretching** ourselves, and **working** together, to give **as much as we possibly can** of our time, and talents, and resources **to love our neighbors**, and support our faith community, as it strives to **love our neighbors**.

I hope all of us will hear this **challenge**, and find ways to **stretch** ourselves to **love** even more.

Amen.