

The Stewardship of Earthen Vessels

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Third Presbyterian Church
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I Corinthians 4:5-18

Thank you, Chancel Choir, for another outstanding year of inspired worship leadership. We are grateful for your gifts, and, in this Year of Stewardship, the ways you share those gifts. Thanks in particular ways to Caroline Robinson and Peter DuBois for your wonderful leadership. We are grateful indeed.

And thank you, Riki Connaughton, for your three decades of marvelous service. Your faithfulness and commitment have enhanced the choir's ministry over those years. The good news is that while you will be changing roles, you will not be disappearing from the choral scene at Third Church. We are, again, grateful indeed.

Finally, a pastoral word. This week, two well-known people committed suicide. Countless others also did this week whose names will not make headlines. If you, or someone you know, is experiencing depression that is leading to suicidal thoughts, call someone. A professional. A friend. A hotline. One of us. And know, in the face of every circumstance, what a beloved child of God you are.

This is the concluding Sunday of our “year of stewardship,” though it is not the end of stewardship, so don't worry! We've discovered such rich treasures in our 190th anniversary year that we are embracing a related theme next year – a “year of stories.” More on that in September.

Stewardship, as I have said time after time, is about more than money, though it is also about money. At a deeper level, stewardship is about caring for, investing, cultivating, all of the gifts a gracious and generous God so abundantly gives us. Money is such a gift. So is time. So are skills and abilities. So are relationships, and stories, and values. So is this place – this actual place and its history and the ministry this place gathers and disperses.

Last September, on Rally Day, three of you shared what stewardship meant to you.

- Katie Orem said that “Stewardship is a way of being in the world and with the church. It is doing the best we can with what we have, and always striving to know more, so we can do better. It is taking care of our church and community (for) future generations.
- Gregg Hamberger invited us to “Be a good steward of the abundance we share—share not only whatever monetary resources are available to you, but share also your own personal abundance of energy, and talent, and time.”
- Nancy Watson said that “stewardship is a verb – doing, learning, listening, feeling...all tangled together...it is giving, healing, building, planting, feeding, holding, comforting.”

What does that look like? How will be stewards, caretakers, investors, in all of the abundant gifts God gives us so generously and graciously? How do we nurture generosity and abundance in a world that seeks to convince us of scarcity?

In the biblical letter called II Corinthians, the Apostle Paul writes to a new, small, struggling, conflicted church in the city of Corinth. He knows that they are facing difficulties and are quite discouraged. Paul encourages them. Do not lose heart. Even if people do not seem to respond to your ministry, keep at it.

Paul reminds them that, ultimately, it is not about them. It is about God, which re-calibrates their ministry in such a way that gives them confidence. It is about God, and not us, and because it is about God, your efforts will never be in vain.

Then this: “We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God, and not from us.”

Treasure in clay jars. Other versions of the Bible offer the translation “earthen vessels.” I’ve always liked that. It’s a little more poetic – while remaining accurate – and while a jar holds something to be used, peanut butter, mayonnaise, baby food, a vessel carries something, to hold for a season, to care for it.

Earthen vessels we are, you and me, all of us. We have been something to carry. A treasure.

What does that look like? A few weeks back, on the way to Ann’s graduation, I exited off I-71 in Akron and visited the cemetery where my parents are buried. It had been a little while. When my grandmother, my dad’s mother, died, my parents, mostly my mother, decided to buy eight plots. It was an attempt at good stewardship, if not bad math. Years later I finally broke it to her that the likelihood of me being buried in Akron, Ohio was slim. So in this section of the cemetery are all four of my grandparents, my parents, and some other lovely plots that we’d be willing to sell to you at a very reasonable rate.

It was raining softly when I arrived. I paid homage to my grandparents, and then made my way to see Ken and Claudia. And though grief is *always* present, I surprisingly and unexpectedly began weeping, and weeping, and weeping, at some point tears and raindrops indistinguishable. I wasn't embarrassed at all by it, just caught a little off-guard, so much so that I actually started laughing. I told them how Kenneth was doing, that Ann was about to graduate, that we all were hanging in there. I thanked them, which I always do, and told them I loved them and missed them, and then went on.

Treasure in earthen vessels. My dad preached about stewardship, in such a way that I still remember his stewardship sermons. In the face of hardship he sought to proclaim the gospel as faithfully as he could.

My mom was a steward, when she taught school, when she counselled students and families, when she served on presbytery committees, when she served on PEO and church committees. They were far from perfect – clay jars, remember – so while my cemetery tears were certainly about grief, I am 100% sure they were about gratitude as well.

In just the last few months at Third Church, we've been privileged to host a half dozen or so memorial services. They have been outlets for grief, to be sure, and they have also been outlets for deep gratitude. They have also been outlets for community, with a special word of thanks to our Deacons and a wonderful memorial service reception team for their unflagging, gracious hospitality.

When families meet with me to plan, they often say that they want a celebration, which means, I think, they want to avoid sadness. That can't be done, I usually say. Grief is a part of all of this. But they are always celebrations, anyway, always, because gratitude wins every time over grief, because life wins every time over death.

Each of these memorial services reflected that. Individually compelling, yes, and taken collectively, a continual witness to stewardship, to the power of whatever treasure it was that God had placed in each of those earthen vessels. Decades and decades of matrimony. Decades and decades of parenthood. Decades and decades of friendship. Decades and decades of effective work. Decades and decades of invaluable leadership, here, and in many places. Peter and I and those in attendance heard about commitments to domestic violence, to the environment, to peace and justice, to music and art, to housing and hunger. These friends left their fingerprints on the world, and they certainly left their fingerprints on the story of this congregation.

They were many things, but on a day like today, they were stewards. They were fragile containers into which God poured mercy and grace and love and compassion, and they knew that, rather than sealing it up tight, they were to pour it out, share it, with family and friends

and strangers, with their church, with the world, to make a difference. Vessels who have now been returned to the earth, ashes to ashes, and whose good work continues to go before them.

Biblical scholar David Fredrickson asks “What is the treasure. Is it the gospel and its ministry? Furthermore, what are earthen vessels? Are they the cheap and humble pots used for lowly and vulgar purposes? Or does Paul wish to evoke the body’s natural fragility?”

Bryan Findlayson writes that “It is an amazing fact but true, (that) we bear the image of the living God, and yet we bear that image in an ineffective, limited, even compromised frame and so have to admit to being constantly overcome by the circumstances of life: ‘Hard pressed on every side.... perplexed..... persecuted..... struck down.’”

We are all those things. And yet Paul insists that despite of that – our utter humanness, or rather, perhaps, because of that, our utter humanness – God has, in God’s wisdom, created us, called us, to carry the good news, to hold for a season God’s light, and to share it. You and me. Us. What’s so special about us? Well, nothing, until God has decided to make us special, calling us God’s own, and giving to us God’s message, this treasure. Us.

Paul Sampley writes that “‘Treasure in earthen vessels’ is a powerful...metaphor that recognizes the awesome trust God bestows upon each of us and at the same time honors our fragility as bearers of God’s grace and might. The image allows...us to celebrate the awesome blessing of life and joy in tribulation, limitation and difficulty. Because we are God’s chosen vessels, we do not need to build cathedrals or make pilgrimages, to engage in extraordinary actions to prove our faith. Instead, we simply need to live our lives each day in ways that love and honor one another.”

Annie Dillard writes: “How we spend our days is how we spend our lives... There is no shortage of good days. It is good lives that are hard to come by.”

How we spend our days is how we spend our lives. That is an affirmation of faith and an invitation to stewardship.

As is this, the poem I quoted last September – I am sure you remember – the poem that has stayed with me in this year of stewardship. Mary Oliver asks me, asks us: “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

The question is not whether, but how? How *will* we spend our days? What *do* you plan to do with your one wild and precious life? How *will* you be a steward of the treasure God has given you, to be carried in a fragile, resilient, all-too-human, grace-filled earthen vessel?

A year of stewardship may conclude, but a lifetime adventure of stewardship awaits. That's our story – all to the glory of God. Amen.