

Sermon for Nov. 21, 2010
1 Cor. 16: 1-4;13-14; Luke 18: 35-43

Let only your voice, O King, be heard in these words. Amen.

What Will We Give the King?

If I had been smart, I would have timed this Stewardship sermon with next week's Reformation Sunday service and, in not very theological terms, killed two birds with one stone. Why? Because stewardship has always been a central tenet of Reformed Theology. Pick up any of our thirteen historical confessions and you will find that returning thanks to God and living as God's faithful stewards are of paramount importance. Why? Because everything we have comes from God. *Everything* we have comes from God.

But first, so that this isn't some dry financial talk but a joyful and encouraging sermon, a stewardship joke:

There was a rich man who was quite distressed over the prospect of not being able to take his riches with him when he died. So, before he died, he loaded his briefcase with two gold bars from his private vault and left instructions to have the case locked with the key, handcuffed it to his wrist and the key placed into his grave clothes. His family carried out his orders correctly, to the letter.

When he appeared at the pearly gates, he had the briefcase with him, key in hand. St. Peter asked, "What do you have in your suitcase?" Very proudly, the man unlocked the case, opened it and displayed his two gold bars. St. Peter said, "Isn't that special! You brought pavement."

God doesn't need our money, and we cannot take it with us. We are called, then, to give because giving is part of modeling Christ who gave us everything, including his life. The stewardship relationship begins in Genesis with God's creation handed to us to care for. It is found throughout scripture, especially in the Psalms where the people proclaim: "The earth is the LORD's, and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein" (Ps. 24:1). God is the author of all things, the creator of all things, and the owner of all things. Whatever God makes, God owns. What we own, we own as stewards who have been given gifts from God Himself.

What, then, is a steward? In past cultures, the steward was not the owner of the house, but was hired by the owner to manage household affairs, including managing the property, keeping food on the table, paying bills, tending to the grounds and livestock, and insuring the house was well-maintained. The steward was responsible for the good and faithful care of everything that belonged to the owner. That kind of stewardship has

been passed on to each one of us. *We* are now the good and faithful stewards of all that God has given us: our families, our material items, our churches, our planet, our environment, and ourselves. Everything, including our very breath, is on loan to us from God. Everything is a gift, and so, we give back not out of obligation but out of gratitude. God loves a cheerful giver because God appreciates those who appreciate what it is that they have been given.

Author G.B. Stern wrote, “Silent gratitude isn’t much use to anyone.” In fact, I would add that silent gratitude is actually ingratitude. So, play a little game with me, and in these situations, see if you agree:

You are driving east on the Beltline at 5:15 in the afternoon and someone is trying to merge coming off Modis Road into bumper-to-bumper traffic. Instead of flooring it to pass the car, you slow down and let the driver in. He doesn’t wave or acknowledge your gesture.

Several people are trying to enter the grocery store. You are the first one to the door, so you step aside and hold it open. Not a single person says thank you.

You take the time and effort to send a young person a graduation gift or buy a young couple a wedding gift, and you never hear from either.

The parking lot is filled with holiday shoppers, and pedestrians are dodging cars. You stop in front of Wal-Mart and wait with a smile for several people to cross to their cars. Not one person waves or smiles back.

You go out to lunch with a friend and pick up the tab and your friend doesn’t thank you.

You host the Family Thanksgiving Dinner, spending hours on preparation and money on food and beverages, and no one expresses appreciation for your trouble.

You give a gift of yourself, of your presence, or a talent, or a skill, sharing something with someone when you really could have been doing something else, and in return no gratitude is shown.

How do you feel? Appreciated?

Let’s continue. You can see to read the paper, watch the news, program a computer, and notice the full moon. You can hear a loved one’s voice. You can touch a friend’s arm or a loved one’s face. You can taste this morning’s coffee with cream or the tang of fresh juice. You can feel the soft skin of your child or grandchild. You can laugh at something funny. You have family to love who loves you in return. You have a safe place to worship as you feel called to worship. Your life has been extended into eternity in the

presence of God by the sacrifice of God's own son, Jesus Christ. Have you and I thought to say thank you to God? Are we giving back with generous gratitude?

Lately, the practice of gratitude has been on my mind. Sometimes it feels like a lost art. I wonder how Christ—the one we call “King”—feels witnessed to in a culture that has forgotten the common courtesy of simply saying “Thank you” and where genuine appreciation is so seldom expressed. I've been wondering that for some time, which is why Luke's gospel struck me as a good example of the practice of stewardship.

As I studied this reading, I felt we could all relate to the blind man. There are times that we, too, cry out to Jesus for what we need. There are times that we beg him to ask us, “What do you need from me?” so that we can recite our lists ready at hand. But as I reread the passage, the verse that stuck with me was this: “*Immediately* the blind man received his sight and followed Jesus, praising God. When all the people saw it, they also praised God.”

Immediately. Thankfulness was this man's first response. This man who had received a gift thanked God and followed Jesus. Well, that's no surprise, is it? We'd do the same thing if we were cured of blindness, right? Until we remember the story of the ten lepers who were healed and how only one of them returned to thank Jesus. Until we remember those times our requests have been granted and, in our excitement or relief, we failed to say thank you. Until we remember in the midst of our blessings those times all we had were complaints. But this man first gave thanks, and because of his expression of gratitude, all the people who saw what happened also thanked God. “Silent gratitude isn't much use to anyone,” but gratitude expressed is contagious!

When we give thanks out loud, when we tell others about what God has done in our lives, when we share from the bounty we have received, when we make an effort to let others know of our appreciation, not only is our own faith strengthened but so is the faith of others. Stewardship, then, involves not only expressing thanks to God but tending to our families, friends, and church with, as Paul states, *love*. Disciples of Jesus give out of love.

And financial stewardship, whether or not we like to be reminded, is something expected of each one of us. So, another little stewardship joke: *As a man and his family drove home after church, he was complaining about everything. He said, “The music was too loud. The sermon was too long. The announcements were unclear. The building was hot. The people were unfriendly.” He went on and on, complaining about virtually everything. Finally, his very observant son said, “Dad, you've got to admit it wasn't a bad show for just a dollar.”* Paul makes it clear how giving is to be practiced: “On the first day of every week (that would be Sunday), each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn” for the work of the church (1 Cor. 16:2). Paul's point is that giving is communal and that a thoughtless gift to the Lord of all gifts isn't really a gift at all. He

describes stewardship as an action that is planned and intentional, a readiness to give ahead of time, to contribute to the work of God, instead of scurrying in our pockets at the last minute for any loose and leftover change. Paul's kind of giving is what we can call *faithgiving*—giving first to God knowing that God will provide for us.

Faithgiving is why I did intentionally plan this sermon for today, the day we celebrate the burning of the mortgage and the paying off of church debt. While we thank God for that great accomplishment, there is still great giving of time, talent, and money to be done. I can't find anywhere in scripture where it says, "You don't have to give God as much once the mortgage is burned." Sorry, it's just not there. In fact, you may be asked to give more for the ministry of Christ to continue here with a full-time pastor, new ideas, and new ways to serve in this community where God called you to build a church not just for today, but for years and years to come. What we think is so important to invest money in now cannot be taken with us, unless it is invested in discipleship. Helping to build God's kingdom here is the only accomplishment that we can take with us.

So, my question is, "What gift will we give the King?" In our King's presence this morning, we sing and we say that we fall down before him and we praise his name forever and ever. We PRAISE his name. We give THANKS. If what we have proclaimed is more than just words, we will not give him silent, thoughtless, or unexpressed gratitude but something given with great love, with great joy, and with generous appreciation, whatever that amount may be.

I'd like to end with one final thought. When we meet our Lord face to face, what are those questions we will want to ask of him? Often it's things like "Why didn't you heal my brother?" or "Why did my marriage end?" or "Why did I get cancer?" or "Why did my spouse have to die?" and any other number of inexplicable events that have tested our faith. What if, instead, we made a conscious decision that when we meet the Lord, the first thing we will say is "Thank you"? That mindset would change the way we approach "Stewardship Season" and the way we live, so that every day could be a day of *faithgiving*.