Stewardship and Faith

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Few elements or doctrines of Christian faith have been shortchanged and misunderstood stewardship. Even though we know better, the fact is that in most of our churches when we speak of "stewardship Sunday" people understand that we are referring primarily to money and to support for the church. No matter how much we say that stewardship has to do also with time and talents, still that seems to be only the background for the real agenda, which has to do with money. Certainly, the management of money is a fundamental element in Christian stewardship. But stewardship is much more than that. Furthermore, stewardship is much more than the matter of how we manage time, talents, and money.

In order to understand the full meaning of stewardship, it may be good to begin with the original meaning of the word "steward" – *oikónomos*. In New Testament times, many land owners were absentee owners. Most would visit their rural properties occasionally, preferring to live in the comfort and active social life of the city. The very word for a steward, *oikónomos*, is derived from the words *oikós*, meaning "house," and *nómos*, meaning "law" or "rule." In passing, one may note that the source of our English word "economics." The *oikónomos* is the manager of the home or the property of the master. Thus, the steward was the person – often a trusted slave — who remained on the property, managing it for the absent owner. This has several implications that are important for a Christian understanding of stewardship.

The first of these is that stewardship is not simply something that we add to theology or to the Christian ethics as an appendix. Surprisingly enough, as you read the stories in Genesis stewardship is part of the very purpose for which humankind was created. In the first creation story in Genesis, after creating all the rest, God says: “let us make the human being in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens”, etc. In other words, as God creates humans, God determines that they will share in God’s dominion over all creation. This being that God now creates will be God’s steward on earth. In the second story, in Genesis 2, God plants the garden and places the man in it, “to work it and keep it.” Contrary to common opinion, the tilling of the garden is not a consequence of sin and the Fall, but is rather part of God’s original purpose in the creation of human beings. We are created to till the garden of God. No matter what Christian folklore says, Genesis does not say that work is the result of sin. God placed Adam in the garden “to work it and keep it.” What is the result of the Fall is toil: “cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you. . . By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread.”

A steward has authority over the entire house or property of the owner. But this also means that if the steward mismanages what has been entrusted by the Owner, the property itself goes astray. It is no longer what the Master intended. And it rebels against a steward who does not really represent the Owner.

Secondly –and this may surprise us—the very notion of stewardship implies the absence of the master. In ancient times, a steward proved his true worth in the absence of the master. While the master was there, it was a simple matter of doing what the master told him to do. But when the master was absent it was up to the steward to know the master's mind sufficiently well to do what the master would want done, and to make the decisions that the master would make. Have you ever noticed how many of the parables that we usually call "parables of stewardship" are parables of absence? The parable of the talents speaks of a man who was "going on a journey" and entrusted his servants with various numbers of talents, and "then he went away." Thus, the parable is about how the servants manage the master's property while the master is not present.

Similarly, the parallel parable in Luke – the parable of the Ten Pounds – begins: "A nobleman went to a distant country" – he absented himself. A parable in Mathew speaks of a bridegroom who is delayed – in other words, he is not there. A master returns after a period of absence and discovers how a servant has been keeping his household.

"In Lk 20.9-18 Jesus tells another parable of absence: 'A man planted a vineyard, and leased it to tenants, and went to another country for a long time.' There is a parallelism between this parable and the story of creation. God made the earth and all that is part of it, and planted a garden, and gave it to the human couple to manage. And it was all very good. And then God rested!

“God´s rest” is an expression of the love that leads to creation. In the past, I have often spoken about how the doctrine of creation means that all things subsist thanks to God’s providence, and that this is so much the case that if God’s sustaining hand were to be removed for an instant, all creation would disappear. This may be a good way to express an important truth. But as I look at these parables of absence, and join them with the biblical notion of God’s rest, I see another dimension of God’s creative love that needs to be stressed. God’s love is such that God decides to create other beings besides Godself.

Just as earthly parents deciding to have a child are also deciding to create someone beyond themselves, not entirely in their control, so God’s decision to create the world and to create us is a decision to create something beyond Godself, and not entirely under God’s control – even though we know that ultimately God’s purposes shall prevail.

We often speak of the presence of God, and rightly so. But this other theme or metaphor of absence is also common in the Bible. Even apart from sin, God gives the human creature space, freedom to exercise its responsibility. In the story of the garden, after creating humankind, and giving them dominion over the rest of creation, God lets them exercise that dominion, even though it also implies the possibility of sin. And this absence, just as much as the divine presence, is a sign of love.

The image of parenthood may be taken one step further. Parental love is not manifested only in the act of procreation, and not only in the many actions of feeding, defending, nurturing, and guiding, but also in a parent's acts of absence.

Soren Kierkegaard put it this way: "When a child is allowed to hold on to its mother's dress, can we say he is walking along with her, just as his mother walks? Nay, we may not say so. First must the child learn to walk alone and on his own, before he can go the way his mother does, and go as she is going. And when the child is learning to walk alone, what must the mother do? She must make herself invisible. That her tenderness toward him is the same and remains unaltered, … we know very well; the child, on the other hand, may not always understand it." And Dame Julian of Norwich also wrote: "The mother may sometimes suffer the child to fall and to be distressed for its own benefit. … And if we do not feel ourselves eased, let us at once be sure that he is behaving like a wise Mother."

We are learning. We are learning to live as God's children in a world where the hand of our Eternal Parent is not always visible, in a world where God has placed us to be stewards of the absent Master, to grow as we could not where God is always holding our hand and guiding our every step.

But the story in Genesis has an added tragic dimension: the steward has failed to manage the property of the Master as the Master intended. The Master gave instructions: "You shall not

eat." And we have not followed those instructions. Therefore, this world, created by God, is also godless. It is a world of injustice and oppression, of war and prejudice, of hate and falsehood. It is in this world that we are called to be stewards – stewards not only of what we have as our personal property, but stewards of the entire creation.

All of this leads to a **third dimension** of stewardship that we often do not mention, but is enormously important. Stewardship is always risky. Our divine Mother does not always hold our hand as we learn to walk. Our divine Father knows that we have to take the risk of falling if we are to learn really to walk on God's paths. The talents must always be invested in an uncertain market. We have to keep oil in the lamp for when the bridegroom comes, even though we do not know when that will be.

Quite obviously, Christians do not always agree on what the proper course of action is. Is this the proper use of my money? Is this the proper use of my public voice and my vote? Is this actually the career I should follow? We are all familiar with these questions, for we have asked them repeatedly. And we know that, just as individual Christians do not always agree, churches also do not always agree.

There is no easy solution to any of these questions. There certainly is guidance, but no true roadmap. We may say that we should tithe. But we still need to know where that tithe should go and how it should be used, and also what we must do with the other 90% — for true

stewardship involves 100% of our possessions. We may say that in human relations the law of love must prevail. This clearly means that prejudice has no place in Christian life. But the truth is that the nature of prejudice is such that people who are prejudiced do not know that they are. It means that we must feed the hungry, but we all know that there are debates as to how this is to be done.

How are we to manage this conundrum? First of all, we must acknowledge that in this world we only know in part, and that faith always, as in the case of Abraham, requires the risk of the unknown.

What a good steward in ancient times had to do was to know the mind and purposes of the master. When the master was absent, and a decision had to be made, a good steward could not wait until absolutely clear instructions were received. He simply had to take the risk of doing what he thought the master would want him to do.

This means that good stewardship requires knowing the mind of the master. A steward in an olive oil plantation could know all about how to care for olive trees, how to produce oil, and how to keep accounts in order. All this would be good and important. But if he did not know the master's mind he could not manage the plantation as his master would wish.

This is why it is important to know our divine Master's mind. And this is what connects stewardship with worship, Bible study, and devotion. It is through these means that we come to know the mind of God. This is why stewardship cannot be simply a subject about which we preach when we are working on the church's budget, or canvassing our members for pledges. In a way, stewardship, faithful stewardship, informed stewardship, is the goal of our worship, our teaching, our preaching, and all our church life. We seek to be a community that knows its Master's mind and acts according to that mind even when there are no clear directives, when God does not speak, when God seems to be absent and expects us to take our hesitant steps of obedience. The church cannot be a good steward – none of us can be good stewards – if we do not know the Owner's mind and purposes.

But even so, the risk of stewardship is always there. In the parable of the talents, the only one of the three servants who claims to know something of the mind of the master is the third one, the one who says, "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed," And yet, he is the one who apparently least knows that mind. He did not know that his master would have expected him to invest the money, and therefore when the master returns he is not pleased.

In summary, so far, we have seen, first, that stewardship is an **essential point** in Christian doctrine; second, that stewardship takes place in the **apparent absence of God**; and, third, that stewardship is **always risky**.

Now we come to a **fourth point**: Stewardship is always provisional. John Chrysostom, probably the most famous preacher of all time, reminded those in his audience who had lands, that countless others had owned that very land before they did, and that many others would own it after them. Even though our human laws allow us to write wills and decide what will happen with our property after we die, we know that whatever we decide is temporary. Eventually new circumstances will arise, and many others will hold what we now hold without even knowing our names. In truth, we own nothing in the absolute sense. Whatever we have is really on loan.

This is made clear by common wisdom, "you can't take it with you." But it is also the theme of several of the parables of Jesus about stewardship. One is the story of the rich fool who built bigger barns. But there is another parable that is very important in order to understand the provisional nature of our stewardship and is one about which we seldom preach. It is the parable usually called "of the unfaithful steward." The story is fairly clear: The owner of a property learns or hears that his manager is not doing as well as he should. So he calls in the manager and tells him that he is fired and must render an account before he goes. So, the manager is on notice, but still has power over the master's accounts. He knows that unless he is very shrewd he will only have two options: he will either have to do physical labor, and he is not strong enough to do that, or he can beg, and he is too proud to follow that route. But he has a third alternative: he can use the power he still has over the present order, before he is definitively out of his master's house, in order to make certain that when he leaves his present position he will have friends who will support him. He therefore feathers his nest with a view to

his firing. So he calls his master's debtors and colludes with them to falsify the bills. To a man who owes one hundred barrels of oil, he says, "Take your bill, and sit down quickly, and write fifty." And to another who owes a hundred measures of wheat he instructs to write eighty. And so on.

And Jesus presents this scoundrel as an example to be followed!

This is a parable we often avoid. I have seen countless church windows depicting a sower scattering seed, or a good Samaritan helping another, or the father receiving the prodigal, or the good shepherd carrying a wounded sheep. But I have never seen a church window in which a sly-looking man turns to another and says, "let's cheat my master; sit down quickly and where it says a hundred write fifty"!

In passing, let me point out that this should serve as a warning not to turn the parables into mere moral examples that people should follow. The good Samaritan and the father who receives the prodigal are commendable by normal human standards, and therefore it is easy to read the characters in those parables as examples to follow in daily life. But Jesus speaks of this scoundrel as someone to be imitated! And therefore we probably do not preach about it, and we certainly do not represent it on church windows! Some Christians read the parable of the talents and find in it justification for investing in the stock market. But those very people would be incensed if an employee did to them what this steward does to his master! Next time you

preach about the talents, try following it on the next week with this other parable. And see what reactions you get!

In any case, let us look at the parable itself. The man has been given notice, but still for a limited time retains the management of his master's affairs. The question he asks is the same as that of the man who decided to build bigger barns: "What will I do?" The rich fool decides to build bigger barns. What makes him a fool is not that he builds barns, but that he deceives himself into thinking that he really owns his own life, and that the grain in the barns will somehow assure his life. The wise scoundrel in this other parable also asks himself, "What will I do?" But his answer is wiser than that of the man with the barns. He does not seek to strengthen his position in his present employment. He is on notice, and there is not much he can do to prevent his firing. A less shrewd manager could possibly decide that, since he is on notice, he will have nothing to do with his master's possessions. He will simply ignore them and let the master worry about it. Or he could decide that, since his management is coming to an end, he will enjoy what he now has to the hilt. But he follows a third alternative: he uses the power he still has over his master's affairs with a view to the unavoidable future of his firing.

What all this means for our present stewardship should be quite obvious. Actually, perhaps the reason why we do not hear more of this parable is that it is altogether too clear. And we do not like what it says!

As we read this parable, we are immediately reminded that as stewards we have all been given notice. Soon or later, all our possessions – even our present life itself – will be taken from us. Like the manager in the parable, there is nothing we can do about our firing. This is a universal human experience. Death is more certain than taxes. No matter how good a steward you are, you are on notice. So we all ask the question of the rich fool and of the unfaithful steward, "What shall I do"?

There are two answers that the steward could have given to that question. Still today, they are common answers, going in opposite directions. One is to decide that, since life is short and all these things will be taken away from us, we might as well enjoy them while they last. This is the answer that Paul suggests to the Corinthians who have no hope in the resurrection: "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." It is also the answer that has become most common in recent centuries. As we do our utmost to enjoy the goods of the present age, we hope to forget that we have been given notice. Sometimes we succeed to the point that we actually convince ourselves that our enjoyment will be permanent – like the rich fool who thought that the answer to the perplexities of life was to build bigger barns.

A second answer, that was much more common in centuries past than it is now, but still remains in many religious circles, is to decide that, since the good of life are not really ours, we might as well forget about them. The steward in the parable could well have decided that, since his master's wealth would no longer be in his hands, he might as well ignore it or even reject it. He

could well decide then, since he would eventually end up digging trenches, rather than dealing anymore with his master's property he might as well go ahead and start digging, just to get used to it.

The parallel is a sort of religion that was prevalent in the Mediterranean world in the time of Jesus and is still prevalent in some circles. This is the sort of religion that claims that only the "spiritual" is good, and that matter and the present life are either worthless or perhaps even evil. Unfortunately quite often misguided Christians have followed – and still follow – this path. This was the religion of those who responded to the question, "What shall I do?" by withdrawing from society, digging their own tombs, and reflecting on it. This is the religion of those who convince themselves that being a Christian means setting aside all the joys of the present life, and probably also condemning others who still seem to enjoy the present life.

But the way that Jesus proposes, and the way of true faithful stewardship, is different. Like the steward who knew that he was on notice and used the authority he still had in the light of the coming future, believers know that we are already on notice. But this does not mean that our stewardship has ended. What it means is that we are to use the authority we still have over things in the present age in the light of the future God has promised. We are promised a future of peace, justice, and love. As stewards preparing for that future, we are to use the authority we now have over things in works of love, peace, and justice. As Jesus says in the Sermon on the

Mount, it is a matter of not storing up treasures on earth, where moths and rust destroy, but of storing treasures in heaven.

And yet, this is not to lead us to a long-faced, stern and sour rejection of the joys and beauty of the things God has entrusted to us. As believers in the God of creation, we know that things are good, that life is good, that joy and enjoyment are good, that beauty is to be appreciated, that joy and laughter are part of the many gifts God has given us. So we are as free to enjoy the goods of creation as are those who say that, since life is short, you might as well enjoy it. But our use of those gifts and our joy in them will be different, for they are not grounded in trying to forget the future—life is short, therefore let's enjoy it—but rather in knowing that our future is in the hands of God—life will go on, therefore let's enjoy it now as we prepare to enjoy it later.

In short, our stewardship is provisional; but it must take place and be guided in the hope and full expectation of eternity.

All of this leads us to a **fifth** point that is a corollary of the antecedent: Stewardship requires that we acknowledge that there is no such thing as an absolute right of property. Quite often the first point in many of our stewardship sermons is that all we have has been given to us by God. But this is not necessarily true.

It is not true first of all because God has not “given” us anything. It all still belongs to God. At best, we have been given a loan or a trust to manage. If stewardship is temporary, so is property. It is a loan that must be returned. And, as in the parable of the talents, it should be returned improved rather than damaged or diminished. As the hymn that is commonly sung after the collection of offerings says, “We give the but thine own, whate’er the gift may be; all that we have is thine alone, a trust, o God from thee.”

This is different from the manner in which Roman law understood the rights of property. According to Roman law the right of property was threefold: *usus, fructus, abusus* – the right to use, to enjoy, and to abuse. To this day we have the legal term usufruct, which now means that one has the right to use and enjoy a property, but not to alienate it. Originally, however, this meant that one had the right to use and to enjoy a property, but not to abuse it. If we translate all of this into the subject of stewardship, it means that all property is in usufruct. Ultimately speaking, we have the right to use and to enjoy, but no matter how much we try we cannot dispose of it forever. This reminds us of the Law of Israel, when God said, “the land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine” (Lev 25.23).

But our having all possessions in usufruct also means that we do not have the right to abuse them. We must manage them in such a way that whoever possesses them later can also use and enjoy them. Obviously, in today’s world this is particularly true of the ecosystem in which we

live. We do not have the right – no owner has the right – to abuse the property that has been entrusted to us.

We must also question the notion that "all we have has been given to us by God" on another score. If a thief has something, we would never say that it has been given to him by God. So, before I claim that what I have has been given to me by God I must consider how I acquired it. Did I inherit it from ancestors who obtained it by injustice? Do I have it as a result of unjust laws and social practices? Did I amass my wealth by exploiting others? By paying unfair wages? I shall not go as far as Jerome, who declared that a wealthy man is either an unjust man or the heir of one; but I believe I must constantly ask myself how and why I have what I have.

On this score, faithful Christian stewardship requires that we learn from Zacchaeus, "If I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." As Ambrose reminds us, charity is giving others what belongs to us; justice is restoring to them what belongs to them; and one cannot begin to practice charity until one has practiced justice.

But the fact that there is no absolute right of property does not mean that property rights are not important. The same early Christian writers who criticized the abuse of property rights and the exploitation of the poor declared that the right of property is important, for without it one could not practice charity. If no one has anything, one of those writers said, how can one give

anything to the needy? How can one feed the hungry? If Christ commanded us to do so, it must be because we are expected to have something to give.

Something similar is said by David in 2 Samuel 24. In that story David is instructed to raise an altar in Jerusalem, on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. When Araunah sees David coming to him he runs to pay homage to the king and asks why David has come to him. David tells him that he has come to buy the threshing floor from Araunah, and Araunah offers to give it to him, as well as the oxen to be sacrificed on the altar. But David replies, “No, but I will buy it from you for a price. I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God that cost me nothing.” While it is true that “all we have is but a loan from God,” it is this sort of limited “having” that allows us to be stewards.

Therefore, while rights of property may be exaggerated and abused, they are important. They are important because, properly understood and properly applied, they allow us to be faithful stewards.

Finally, as a **sixth point**, a word on worship and stewardship. If it is true that stewardship is at the heart of God’s purposes for our creation, and therefore also at the heart of our faith, it must also be expressed in worship. And it is, even though quite often we do not recognize it. There are at least two particular places in worship where this is true.

The first is the Lord's Prayer. Almost without thinking, we say "give us this day our daily bread." As we say this, perhaps we have in mind the fact that ultimately it is God who provides our bread and all we have. But there is more to this petition. Actually, the terminology used here is a quotation of Proverbs 30.7-9, which is a prayer asking God for two things. This first is to be removed from falsehood and lying. But the second, which is the one to which the Lord's Prayer refers, is: "Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God." The NIV correctly translates "the food that is needful for me" as "my daily bread," for the words used here in the Septuagint are the same that appear in the Lord's Prayer. Our prayer is not for unbound prosperity. It is for the fair amount, for too much can easily lead to a sort of satisfaction that sets God aside, and too little may lead to theft, and the profanation of God´s holiness. If we had time, we could delve into the entire prayer, seeing, for instance, what we mean by "hallowed by the name," "thy kingdom come." Or even "Our Father" when we read it all through the lens of "give us this day our daily bread."

But in the time that is left let us look at the place in worship where stewardship immediately comes to mind: the offertory. Obviously, it is at the time of collecting and presenting our offerings that the theme of stewardship most easily and commonly comes to the foreground. This makes sense, for this is the time when we present before God that part of our resources that, as part of our stewardship of all we have, we have set aside for the work of the church.

In bringing our offerings to the Lord, we are doing what the church has done since time immemorial. Indeed, in some of the extant earliest descriptions of Christian life and worship –those of Justin Martyr– we are told that when they gathered for worship believers contributed whatever money they could for the care of the needy.

But, also since time immemorial, the "offertory" was much more than that. Throughout most of Christian history, and in many churches to this day, the most important part of the offertory was the act of bringing forth to the table the bread and wine to be used for communion. Jointly with offerings of money, bread and wine were offered.

In this regard, the sacrament of communion is different from baptism. In baptism we use water, pure and simple – water as it is provided by nature. Water, as it rains down on us, is ready to be used in baptism. It is a gift from God, and – at least in ancient times – humans had little to do with producing it. Thus, the water of baptism is a sign of the totally unmerited grace of God.

But such is not the case with bread and wine. Bread does not come in sheaves, and wine does not grow on vines. The sheaves produce wheat that has to be harvested, winnowed, threshed, ground, moistened, and eventually baked. Vines produce grapes that must also be harvested, pressed, strained, fermented. Thus, while the water of baptism reminds us of the unmerited grace of God, the bread and the wine of communion remind us of our work as stewards of the

wheat and grapes God provides. If baptism points to God's grace and undoubted initiative in loving us, communion points to our participation as stewards of the gifts of God.

It must be pointed out, however, that even though we bring these gifts we are still not the hosts. In this sense the offertory is akin to when we go to dinner at someone's home and bring a salad. The salad is a gift to them in gratitude and acknowledgement of their hospitality. When we sit at the table, even though we partake of the salad we brought, we remain guests, and they are the hosts. At communion, the table is not ours, but the Lord's. Even though we provide the bread and the wine, God provides the full meal. It is for this reason that there is a long tradition, after the consecration of the elements, as we are invited to partake, to declare that these are "the gifts of God for the people of God." Thus, communion begins with our bringing our gifts to God, and results in God's returning to us those gifts and much more.

This is what stewardship is all about. It is a constant cycle in which God gives, we receive, we give, and God gives again: "All that we have is thine alone"; "We bring to thee but thine own"; "The gifts of God for the people of God."