

STEWARDSHIP

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A couple of weeks ago I was asked to share with the parish my view of Christian Stewardship and tell my story on how it's impacted my life.

During this "stewardship" and pledge time, we often think of being good stewards in the financial aspect of management and the concept of tithing. We understand that we are entrusted with the fiscal upkeep of the Church and we accept our need to pledge our financial support.

All of us are familiar with Matthew (25: 14-30) the parable of the talents. In fact it was one of the Gospel readings a few weeks ago. To paraphrase: before going on a journey, the master called his servants and entrusted his property to them... to one he gave five talents, to another two talents, to another one, to each according to his ability. The word talent derives from the Latin: "talentum" which was a unit or weight or money. It can be further traced to the Greek word "talanton" which was the pan of a scale and the Greek word "tlenai" which means to bear. So in the usual interpretation of the parable, we understand Jesus to be referring to the distribution of a unit of money entrusted to the servants to manage in the master's absence.

But are there not other definitions for the meaning of talent? From the letter of Paul to the Romans (12: 6-8) "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness."

To me stewardship has always had a different interpretation. According to Webster's stewardship is the conducting, supervising or managing of something. First appearing in middle age English, the word functioned as a job description for a steward or manager of a large household.

Weekly we recite the Nicene Creed believing in One God who created all things in heaven and on earth: seen and unseen. In Genesis, God gave dominion over all of His creation to us, to be stewards and managers over all of His creation. Nothing therefore belongs to us: everything belongs to God and we are just managers over His large household. However, that household is not only planet Earth and our environment, because God's household includes all of our brothers and sisters. Returning to Matthew 25, but a little further on in verses 35-46, Jesus instructs us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, take in the stranger and care for the sick, etc., stating "whatever you did for one of the least of My brothers, you did for Me."

I personally have always had a strong desire to help others. As a young adult, I volunteered as a First Responder: an Emergency Medical Technician. My undergraduate training was as a Pharmacist, and I then went on to get my Doctoral degree in Dental Medicine. But as I reflect back, although the outcome was good, my initial intentions may not have always been stellar. As the saying goes: "the road to Hell is paved with Good Intentions". I did not at that time realize that my scholarly successes were a gift from God, and not solely my own earned rewards to gloat over. I often took pride to the extreme in displaying my "talents".

My "aha" moment came 35 years ago in a field in Tunisia where I was deployed with the Marines. While participating in joint military exercises with Tunisian forces, the flight surgeon approached me with a request to accompany him to a small "village". The settlement was a small U-shaped grouping of huts surrounding a centrally located well... no running water, no electricity, no lighting. It was a village probably not too far removed from what our Lord occupied nearly 2000 years ago. During a break from the military exercises, the children from the village chased after the American Marines and were rewarded with whatever snacks and candy bars the men had in their pockets. My surgeon, Terry, noticed that one little girl grabbed the side of her face and winced in

pain while chewing (although it didn't stop her from finishing the candy bar). His comment to me was: "JR, I think she needs your help"

We were able to locate the child, but had to resort to using hand gestures as the Tunisian villagers didn't speak English, and Terry and I spoke neither French nor the local dialogue. Somehow we communicated that I was the tooth doctor and wanted to help her. We sat her on an elder's lap in the middle of the courtyard and using only God's sunlight, I was able to determine that the youngster had numerous abscesses of her "baby teeth". As I began to address her condition, Terry and I become so focused that we failed to see what was happening around us. Having removed her diseased teeth and dressed her infections, we looked up...

And what greeted us was a line of people waiting to see the Dentist!

Needless to say I did all that I could to treat the people of that Tunisian village until my supplies ran out. I was humbled when the villagers drew water from their well so that I could wash up. And then the thunderbolt struck: as I was given the most significant paycheck that I will ever receive in my life. Giving freely from their meager subsistence, the villagers paid me with 2 eggs and a loaf of bread! Not a lot by our standards, but I am sure that it was an enormous sacrifice on their part to give thanks and show gratitude. I quickly realized what a true offering of thanksgiving was meant to look like. John 3: 27 proclaims "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven" and it was at that moment that the realization struck me that it was not my talents, but our Lord working through me to help His people that had created this special event.

My understanding of stewardship then is not restricted to a monetary understanding. Rather, I envision stewardship as a dedication of self. To my way of thinking, stewardship is a dedication to manage God's Household using my talents to the best of my ability. Many times since that revelation in the fields of Tunisia, have I prayed while operating for

God to direct His healing power to the patient through my hands. I pray daily for the strength to be like Isaiah so that when the Lord calls: “whom shall I send” I can quickly and without hesitation answer “here I am Lord, send me.”

And since I have been received into the family that is Trinity Parish, I am awed, I am humbled to see that dedication of self to serve and to be stewards of God’s creation proclaimed and practiced daily, both individually and collectively. I see it in the strength of the various outreach ministries Trinity supports: from Kateri medical mission in Nigeria and Copprome orphanage in Honduras to supporting South Park Inn and the Wethersfield Food Bank; whether helping to create city-wide dinners at the Cathedral or providing sandwiches for the homeless; from ministering to prisoners in their rehabilitation to providing pocketbooks and necessities to struggling women; and from the generous outpouring of financial support to sponsor the continuing education of over 50 needy children above and beyond support of the Church.

In summary, in the 1st letter of Peter he writes (4: 10-11) “Based on the gift each one has received, use it to serve others, as good stewards of God’s varied grace. If anyone speaks, it should be as one who speaks God’s words; if anyone serves, it should be from the strength God provides so that God may be glorified through Jesus Christ in everything. To Him, belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

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