

StewardCAST

A monthly e-newsletter of LCMS Stewardship Ministry

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Stewardship of the Scars

As the year ends, there are so many things that can capture the mind and life of the Christian steward. There is, of course, the central focus of Advent and Christmas. It is in the anticipatory and celebratory moments that stewardship gets meaning. Stewards eagerly anticipate the annual celebration of the Word becoming flesh. In this action, God Himself becomes a steward. Taking on human flesh, Jesus faithfully and perfectly takes the gifts entrusted to Him and uses them for the glory of the Lord in a way that no other human could. The swaddled child of Bethlehem grows to be the crucified Christ of the cross of Calvary. Of His stewardship there is not

failure. It is all about His response to the Lord's call for Him to offer His life as a ransom for fallen humanity.

During this time of the year, Christian stewards focus on the gift they have been given by the Lord in Jesus. God in the flesh is given for the sake of others. Stewards emulate that generosity with every aspect of their lives. Selfless stewardship is the hallmark of those who have received the greatest Christmas gift of all time! As stewards of this fleshy Gospel good news, stewards are moved to be generous with their life of faith so that others might receive this gift as well. The steward has been created for this!

At the same time of the year that the Christian steward is celebrating the greatest gift of all time, they also deal with the impending end of the year. This is the time of the year when the steward looks back. Certainly, there are elements in the life of the steward, when reflected upon, that bring pride and joy. But there is also a danger in looking back and assessing total stewardship at the end of the year. What do we do about those elements of the life of the steward that don't measure up to the faithfulness that the Lord has in mind? For honest Christian stewards, there are as many, if not more, scars as joys in both daily and yearly reflection on patterns of stewardship.

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Law and Gospel, Saint and Sinner

As steward leaders, how is the church called to deal with the scars of the failed stewardship of our brothers and sisters? This is a serious question that must be dealt with in a direct manner. Do steward leaders resort to crime and punishment? Is it the role of the steward leaders in the congregation, both clergy and lay, to do their best to lay on another layer of maternalistic guilt so that the failed stewards would snap to and do what the Lord has given them to do? Or does the steward leader simply ignore the past failures of the steward and point them forward? This dilemma is the quintessential question of our wonderful Lutheran theology. How do we apply both Law and Gospel to the steward who is at the same time saint and sinner?

Every Christian steward, even the best and most faithful ones, has failed at one time or another. In fact, there are likely more scars in the life of the steward than anyone would care to admit. Steward leaders must have this thought front and center in their ministry. It is in this way that we see that steward leadership is so much more than just the generosity of the individual steward. It is the generosity of

God active in the lives of fallen and redeemed stewards. Steward leadership is a matter of pastoral care.

This is highlighted in *Night Driving: Notes from a Prodigal Soul* by Chad Bird. In a chapter entitled “Stewards of Our Scars,” Bird recounts a story told by Fredrick Buechner:

Buechner presented at a retreat and shared the story of a painful incident in his childhood. Afterward a man named Howard Butt approached him and said, “You have had a good deal of pain in your life, and you have been a good steward of it.” His words took Buechner aback. He had never thought of pain, and its impact on his life, in terms of stewardship. But the more he reflected what it means to be a steward, the more he realized how true the man’s words had been. Later he wrote, “If you manage to put behind you all the painful things that happen to you as if they never really happened or didn’t matter all that much when they did, then the deepest and most human

things you have in you to become are not apt to happen either.”¹

Bird rightly concludes:

Whatever sufferings we have endured, self-inflicted or otherwise, are scars our Father has granted us as a sacred duty. Stewards do not own that for which they are responsible; they are called to faithfully manage what another has given them ... They are the means Jesus uses not to anchor us in the past but to propel us into the future as those who know the wounding power and healing grace of God.²

The steward leader who is attuned to the pastoral care nature of the simultaneously faithful and failed stewards under their leadership will do well to recall that the Lord can and does use stewardship failures and the scars they leave to shape the steward into

¹ Bird, Chad. *Night Driving: Notes from a Prodigal Soul*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, 2017. 137-138.

² Bird, *Night Driving*. 138.



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what He wants them to become! The Father has created the steward. Jesus, the Great Physician, has healed the fallen steward so that they may resume the task of faithful steward. Both Law and Gospel need to be applied. The sinful, failed steward needs to be called to account. But this is never with the intent of condemnation and punishment. The pastoral caring steward leader will seek to use the Law to call to repentance. After all, the entirety of the Christian life is a matter of daily repentance! This applies to the sins of stewardship failures. But the fallen steward needs to be formed and shaped by the Gospel as well. Forgiveness abounds for the broken, restored and scarred steward.

Scars Lead to Blessings

How might this play out in the local congregation? A pastoral encouragement for the stewards to reflect honestly on their annual contributions is the start. This goes beyond the annual giving statement as well. The call for repentance of the steward needs to touch on the failure to serve with the entire life of the steward, not just the wallet and checkbook. Our Lord Jesus' work has atoned for this. As the scars of this guilt start to form, it is critical that the steward leader also then show that the Lord can and does use them to shape them going forward. The sins that have caused these stewardship scars have been fully forgiven by Christ at the cross. However, there is the reality that fallen and forgiven sinners have a memory. As life experience indicates,

people learn lasting lessons from their scars and failures. A steward leader will point the scarred steward to the cross and remind them that the Lord can and does use the discipline of that pain to lead them through the working of the Holy Spirit through Gospel into faithfulness going forward.

As this year closes and a new one is about to begin, it is critical that steward leaders in the congregation are poised to help the people they serve to be good stewards of their scars. This will take a delicate, pastoral touch. But this is not just a pastor issue. All steward leaders, lay and clergy alike, need to look at those the Lord has given them to lead in stewardship pastorally. The reasons for the scars in those served may or may not be clear. Don't assume that if they are in financial difficulty it is because they have too much house, car and boat. The person who does not serve willingly or at all may well have some deep scar of which the leader is not aware. In all cases, the steward leader is called to lovingly and graciously apply the Word of God to the lives of those they serve. Jesus forgives and heals. The Spirit then leads the steward forward. When this is done, stewardship of the scars can be carried out for the glory of God and the extension of His kingdom!

Those scars, faithfully stewarded, can and will lead to blessings in the year to come!

