Growing Generosity: Seasons of Stewardship

All occasions invite God's mercies," wrote the poet John Donne, "and all times are God's seasons."[15] Not so with stewardship. That's something we do in the fall, motivated to raise support for next year's church budget. No wonder "stewardship" so often yields meager results. We seek a harvest without having planted the seeds. Fall is no time for planting.

"The one who sows sparingly, will also reap sparingly," says Paul, "the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully" (2 Corinthians 9:6). Only if stewardship tends to sowing can it lead to reaping. If the church's budget is better called a mission-spending plan, the church's stewardship work is best called a mission-sowing plan. Understood as such, "stewardship" reaps a harvest that includes but goes far beyond dollar support for next year's expenses. The church cannot do its work indifferent to the seasons of the year any more than the farmer can, for the liturgical seasons are not just ecclesiastical divisions of time. They reflect, each in its turn, broad phases of human experience in God's world, a world animated and saved by Christ's appearance in it.

The word "season" comes from a Latin word meaning "act of sowing." Unlike the farming year, each of the seasons of the church year is also a time of reaping: a time when "gifted by God, we offer ourselves in praise." Coming from more than gratitude alone, stewardship praises God as Lord of the harvest, the One whose love and faithfulness assure sowing and reaping. The harvest is not just future bounty but daily blessing—a richer quality of life right now. Our own "sowing" anticipates abundance "beyond anything we can ask or imagine," the promise of God with us enabling us "both to will and to work for his good pleasure," confident that every need shall be satisfied (Ephesians 3:20, Matthew 1:23, Philippians 2:13,19 NRSV). "Praise God, from whom all blessings flow."

So, as a mission-sowing plan, what are the seeds planted and how is God's abundance expected each season of the church year? Knowing that "all times are God's seasons," what are the sowing and reaping that constitute Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost? Stewardship that knows and shows God's mercy at each of these times reaps a harvest of generosity that will not fail come fall or wither during the driest summer of low church attendance and lower giving.

Understood as seasons of stewardship, the church's liturgical year can show how "all times are God's seasons." Along with the lectionary and United Church of Christ Sunday Bulletin themes, the church year can motivate year-round stewardship growth and commitment–inspiring generosity and restoring "giving" to its rightful place at the heart of all seasons of Christian experience.

Advent: Expectation

Stewardship is about managing the abundance that God has made ours—and not just "ours" but everyone's. This abundance is no less than life itself, the gift of God in which all share. How do we understand this gift? That abundance? In Christian understanding, this is expressed in terms of the Advent or coming of Christ—the expectation that in everything we know and face, goodness and mercy are waiting to be born anew and made real again in and for us and others. This is the light that was in the world but which the world knew not, says John (1:10). Amid the deepest shadows of evil and suffering, we expect that God's light shall pierce the gloom, revealing love and justice to which we had been oblivious or "blind."

Is this what we expect? The quality of our expectations determines the quality of our action. As we look at what we face, personally and congregationally, what kinds of questions are we asking? Do we fear the worst or expect the best?

The quality of giving hangs in the balance, awaiting our answer to the question of Advent: Do we believe that even amid the hardest and most challenging circumstances, hope and assurance, power and possibility are on the way, waiting to happen again? Nothing squelches good giving more than misgiving about what we face. Nothing blocks generosity so well as anxiety about what lies before us. Nothing prevents the discernment of abundance better than a fear of scarcity—worry about not having enough.

During the season of Advent, what is sowed is anticipation of goodness and mercy. What is reaped is morale and trust—the "blessed assurance" that overcomes common fears of scarcity. "Gifted by God" with the expectation of abundance, "we offer ourselves in praise," living out this expectation in our own giving.

Christmas: Incarnation

And they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us'" (Matthew 1:23). Stewardship looks at all of life and says, "This is not just a given. It's a gift." That is the perception of "incarnation," the heart of Christmas in light of which *all* we feel and face is no longer just what we make of it, but what God makes of it—the One who in Jesus becomes "flesh of our flesh, bone of our bones"—part of the world as we know it. What God makes is good, twisted and distorted though it has become. And so it is, as Martin Luther put it, "God can draw straight with a crooked line and ride a lame horse." Whether what we feel or face is beautiful or ugly, tragic or fortunate—or anywhere in between—all this is the grist of grace, the cradle of Christ, and the means whereby God again becomes real for us. In the light of Bethlehem, everything betokens God-with-us—everything acquires the quality of "gift."

Is this how we experience life? As truly

a gift or just a given? During hard moments of discouragement or despair, can we, like the great Scottish Christian, Samuel Rutherford, say in effect, "Jesus Christ came into my prison cell last night, and every stone flashed like a ruby"? Can we say with the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God"? Can we say with St. Francis, after a long, uneventful jouney, "I experienced a miracle. Nothing untoward happened."[17]

In the birth of Jesus, creation itself is seen as redemption. In all that is, including everything we feel and face, precisely there is a gift waiting to be recognized as such: the saving presence of God, deeper and wider than all that is contrary. Living out of that sense of life, we give accordingly, no longer handling what we have as ours alone but as something of God. And when we share that sensof life with others, divine goodness is made known all over again, for us, too.

During the season of Christmas, what is sowed is a sense of life as the gift of God-with-us. What is reaped is joy—relief and delight that demands to be shared, like laughter or tears—gladness that spills over into giving. "Gifted by God" with the very presence of the Lord, "we offer ourselves in praise," giving as we have received.

Epiphany: Manifestation

The visit of the Magi to Jesus and his later baptism in the river Jordan are held to mark the appearance ("epiphany": manifestation) of Christ to the Gentiles, that is, the world. Baptism and mission are joined at their source in Jesus, in whom God's self-sharing is seen as the redemption of all creation.

Epiphany is an excellent context in which to understand that we are stewards not just of our resources or God's. More fundamentally, we are stewards of God's own act of generosity as we know this in Jesus. Giving for us means participation in the mission of God's stewardship, sharing in divine generosity. As with Christ himself, our own baptism means that we are not made to find fulfillment in the enclosure of our own lives, among our own kind. Rather, we are *sent* (Latin, *missio*, from which we get our word "mission") to share in the self-giving of Christ to others. And in Jesus this mission, God's mission, is manifest not as idealism seeking to "meet needs" but as realism making known the all-inclusive abundance of God's self-giving love, the redemptive reality of healing and wholeness at the heart of life.

How do we understand our own giving? As sharing what we have, to make up for the deficit of what others lack? As overcoming "scarcity"? Or, as enabling others to experience that in which we all share: the divine bounty of grace and goodness, the redemptive love of God awaiting recognition in all the circumstances of life?

The self-giving of Christ that we are sent to share is not something that happens between "haves" and "have-nots." It is not the alleviation of the "neediness" of others.

That sort of giving is patronizing and elitist. It is benevolence that divides and excludes and is often characterized by calculation of the blessing gained or bestowed by our acts of giving. Rather, "self-giving" establishes our presence alongside others with whom, together, we participate in what God's own giving makes possible: the blessing of healing and wholeness waiting to happen again in us, through us, and for us all.

During the season of Epiphany, what is sowed is an understanding of stewardship as the manifestation of God's own self-giving, which we are sent to share with others. What is reaped is an understanding of baptism as the motivation of both stewardship and mission—"baptism" seen as our incorporation in the redemption of the world, the healing and wholeness to which our giving testifies and in which our giving enables us to participate. "Gifted by God," with God's own self-giving love, "we offer ourselves in praise," showing and sharing the graceful abundance at the heart of life.

Lent: Repentance

Originally a time to prepare candidates for baptism, Lent became a period of penitence for those who have been baptized, a time of spiritual discipline in preparation for the celebration of Easter. At root, penitence, like repentance, concerns a fundamental turning away from self-reliance to trust in God, a change of mind and life direction evoked by the good news of Jesus Christ.

At heart, stewardship is about where we place our trust. It is less about possessions than possessiveness. Our capacity to love is hampered by our need to have. This is an issue of control: How much must I maintain to feel secure? Understood this way, stewardship is a spiritual discipline that loosens our grip on what we have for the sake of what we love. Loving and trusting God in the spirit of Christ, we live and give more freely and openly, less anxiously, less selfishly, more generously. So it is that in his classic work, *Having and Being*, the French thinker Gabriel Marcel, says, "There is neither freedom nor 'real life' without an apprenticeship in 'depossession.'"[18]

This is less a matter of giving up possessions than giving up an attitude—turning over to God the trust that had resided in our own ability to regulate and control what we love and care about. With this turning over, giving itself becomes more natural, and some form of generosity is virtually inevitable.

An ancient rabbi wrote, "We are born with our fists clenched and die with our hands wide open." The plain facts of life and death confirm God's will and point to God's way for us. In effect, we have to find a way to hold onto life with open hands. That is the Lenten discipline of stewardship: learning how to hold what we have less tightly, without clutching, more openly. The lesson is summed up well by Andre Gide, who wrote: "Complete possession is proved only by giving. All you are unable to give possesses you."[19]

How are "possessiveness" and "control" issues in our own lives? During the season of Lent, what is sowed

is an awareness of the tension between loving and "possessing," enjoying and controlling, being and having, generosity and uptightness. What is reaped is a truer sense of giving as repentance—"repentance" understood not morbidly, as turning against oneself, fists clenched, but hopefully, as turning toward God, hands open. "Gifted by God," with the freshly discerned abundance of freedom and confidence we could not grasp with closed hands, "we offer ourselves in praise," knowing that in giving we receive what in possessiveness we lose.

Easter: Resurrection

Writing seventy-five years ago about the future of Europe, the great German poet Rainer Maria Rilke gave unwitting witness to the truth of both Good Friday and Easter: "Hatred is once more the decisive and driving force in a world which can only be healed in the long run by a superabundance of love, mercy, and good will."[20]

Impossible to conceive without Good Friday—blunt testimony to the decisive power of hatred—Easter turns the tables and gives the last word to life and love. In the resurrection of Jesus, the truth of the world is reborn: Justice and goodness shall prevail, outwitting and outlasting the most crucifying powers arrayed against them. Easter says you can put truth in a grave, but it won't stay there.

Stewardship is what happens when we believe this. It is the generosity that flows from a sense of the "superabundance" of life to which Jesus' resurrection testifies. In the light of Easter, fears of scarcity and loss are overcome: We are "born anew into a living hope... an inheritance that is imperishable" (1 Peter 1:3). Never need we fear that who we are, what we have, and how we love are not enough—inadequate given what is necessary—perishable commodities that must be protected. "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves," says Paul, "but our sufficiency is from God, who makes us sufficient... [and whose] Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6).

No uncertainty or hardship we face, no problem or challenge is greater than the power of God. Beating at the heart of life, God's love is stronger than death itself, making possible more than all we can ask or imagine. Released from the anxiety that often constricts the way we live and give, we grow in the joy that makes us more open to others, minded to share, eager to give. How can we keep to ourselves the energy unleashed by the assurance summed up by Paul when he declared, "Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, is able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

How do we understand "resurrection"? Is this but a promise for the future, or also assurance in the present? During the season of Easter, what is sowed is the very present hope made possible by the victory of Christ over death and evil. What is reaped is an outflow of joy and generosity

undeterred by fears of scarcity or inadequacy. "Gifted by God" with this Easter faith, "we offer ourselves in praise," letting our giving testify to the unstoppable power of God's great love.

Pentecost: Power

Associated originally with the Jewish festival that began when the first fruits of the harvest were presented to God, Pentecost for Christians is a celebration of the "first fruits" of the resurrection: the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is the power of God made known in Jesus—"the power of the power of life itself," as Frederick Buechner puts it.[21] Known by its fruit, the Holy Spirit is manifest in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, *generosity*, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

Too often the stewardship work of the church tries to turn on the lights of greater giving when the power is off. New methods of enlisting support, new programs to motivate pledges, new ways of doing a fall campaign—all of these efforts falter and ultimately fail without the energy that inspires giving in the first place: the joy of the Spirit, God's power made ours. Giving that is not "pentecostal" is merely adequate and often meager. Generosity is a fruit of the Spirit.

In the secular world, morale is called the key to better giving. In the church, *morale* is called "Spirit," without which the challenge of giving becomes a plea for support, largely unheeded. Spiritual vitality is the precondition of financial vitality. The number one stewardship task of the church is to build morale—to enhance a sense of God's Spirit, making sure the atmosphere and attitude of the congregation express and nurture an experience of God's power.

This means that stewardship is hardly the monopoly of one committee. It is the responsibility of every committee, indeed the very heart of the church's ministry. The quality of Sunday worship, the excellence of the education program of the church, how well the church enjoys and celebrates its life together, how well the church presents and promotes understanding of its own mission as well as the wider mission, how effectively faith can be shown to strengthen life at home, on the job, in the community-all these are issues bearing on an experience of the presence of God. Where that experience is thin, giving is thinner, and any emphasis on "stewardship" simply depletes further the limited energy of the congregation.

How strong is the power that "turns on the lights" in your congregation? How vibrant is a sense of God's presence? During the long season of Pentecost, what is sowed is an awareness that the goodness and mercy of God are a very present power at work in the world and in each of our lives—*right now.* What is reaped are the "fruits of the Spirit," among which is generosity—giving founded and grounded in firsthand knowledge of the love of God. "Gifted by God" with a sense of divine presence, "we offer ourselves in praise," living for the glory of God as people who know the richness of life at its best.

Notes

1. See M. Douglas Meeks, G***od the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy*** (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 2-4.

2. John L. McKenzie, ***Dictionary of the Bible*** (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 760.

3. "Breath" is the original meaning of the word "spirit" in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. Spirit = breath = life.

4. George Bernard Shaw, ***Man and Superman: A Comedy and a Philosophy*** (New York: Viking Penguin, 1990), 176.

5. This image is drawn from an article by William Kahn, "To Be Fully There," ***Human Relations*** 45, no. 4 (1992): 321-349. A "well" is literally a means of tapping underground water and springs and, in biblical times, was also a local meeting place. Think of what happens at "wells" in the Bible, including but also before Jesus, for example, Moses in Midian.

6. Anthony de Mello, ***Taking Flight: A Book of Story Meditations*** (New York: Image Books/Doubleday, 1988), 46-47.

7. Joseph testifies to God's overruling providence that has already turned sin and something wrong to a good end (45:4-7). In ***Four Quartets*** ("Little Gidding"- III) T .S. Eliot recalls with mixed feeling this sense of "bad" being used for "good," aware this can suggest not just wrong turned to—of use to—right, but wrong turned into right. He uses an old English word calling sin *behovely,* meaning "of use, necessary"—then adding the qualification, "*but* all shall be well" (italics mine). The second question does not deny that bad things are often exactly that: bad, and sometimes wrong or even evil. That they may also be seen as "behovely" is another matter and the point of the question.

8. G. K. Chesterton, ***Tremendous Trifles*** (Folcroft, Penn.: Folcroft Library Editions, 1927), 93.

9. For Frost's remark, see Jeffrey Hart, ***Smiling Through the Cultural Catastrophe: Toward the Revival of Higher Education*** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 12; "Earth's crammed with heaven…" is from Elizabeth Barrett Browning, ***Aurora Leigh*** 7, 1:820-821.

10. Claus Westermann, ***Praise and Lament in the Psalms*** (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 26-27; see also 5-35 and 152- 162.

11. Adam Zagajewski, "Try to Praise the Mutilated World," ***Without End: New and Selected Poems,*** trans. Clare Cavanagh. Copyright ©2002 Adam Zagajewski. Translation©2002 Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, LLC.

12. Richard E. Wentz, ***John Williamson Nevin: American Theologian*** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 56.

13. Antoine de Saint-Exupery, ***Airman's Odyssey,*** trans. Stuart Gilbert and Lewis Galantiane (New York: Harcourt, 1984), 119.

14. "All Glory Laud and Honor," ***The New Century Hymnal*** (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1995), 216. Word alterations ©1993 The Pilgrim Press. Used by permission.

15. John Donne, "Christmas Day, 1625," ***The Complete Poetry and Prose,*** ed. Charles M. Coffin (New York: Random House, 1994), 136.

16. UCC stewardship theme for 1999 based on the lines, "Gifted by you, we turn to you offering up ourselves in praise," taken from "God, Whose Giving Knows No Ending" by Robert L. Edwards. Copyright ©1961 The Hymn Society. Administered by Hope Publishing Co., Carol Stream, Ill. 60188. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

17. Samuel Rutherford, ***Letters of Samuel Rutherford*** (Carlisle, Penn.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1973), 78. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, ***Aurora Leigh***, ed. Margaret Reynolds (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1993), VII, 1. 820-21. Words of St. Francis from William Barclay, ***And Jesus Said*** (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), 107.

18. Gabriel Marcel, ***Having and Being: An Existentialist Diary*** (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1976), 149.

19. Andre Gide, ***Pretexts: Reflections on Literature and Morality*** (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), 95.

20. Rainer Maria Rilke, ***Wartime Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke 1914-1921,*** trans. M.D. Herter Norton (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1947), 23.

21. "God is Spirit, says the Apostle John (4:24). Thus God is the power of the power of life itself, has breathed and continues to breathe himself into his creation. Inspires it. The spirit of God, Holy Spirit, Holy Ghost, is highly contagious. When Peter and his friends were caught up in it at Jerusalem on Pentecost, everybody thought they were drunk even though the sun wasn't yet over the yardarm (Acts 2). They were." Frederick Buechner, ***Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (***New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 90-91.