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There is officially no such liturgical season, but this is, in fact, early “Stewardship-tide”—the time of year when most churches are beginning to think about ramping up the process of making financial plans for the coming calendar year, encouraging their members to make an estimate of how much they intend to give. I don’t know if this was intentional on the part of those who assembled the lectionary, but, as it turns out, the readings appointed for the early Fall indeed often lend themselves to stewardship themes. At the very least it’s convenient for the clergy, who must not only responsibly interpret the word of God from the pulpit, but also lead people in making faithful stewardship decisions. Now, I suppose I’m a bit of an outlier here, being what might be described as a “frequently occasional guest” in this pulpit. That means I can say stuff and then hit the road, because the next time I might see you again on a Sunday will be late Advent, and stewardship will be all wrapped up, whereas the rector, who isn’t here today, has to actually live with you. So we’ll see how this goes!

If there’s any valid generalization one could make about any sermon on the subject of money, it’s that it is bound to generate anxiety. For a first-time visitor to the parish, who just happens to show up when the sermon is about money, or to a relative newcomer, the anxiety takes the form of “Uh, oh, is this one of *those* kinds of churches, that are always harping on money?” So, if you’re a visitor to Ascension today, please don’t form your opinion based solely on this sermon!

For the average “parishioner-in-the-pew,” stewardship anxiety is served with a generous garnish of guilt: “I’m giving all I can, but they say I should give 10%, and I’m certainly not doing *that!* Can’t squeeze blood from a turnip, you know.”

For the Treasurer, and for members of the Vestry, the anxiety is of a different sort: “The diocesan assessment is going up, insurance costs are skyrocketing, the staff are all going to want cost-of-living raises. We’re seriously into our endowments and reserves. Something’s gotta give.”

And for the clergy—well, we also have our peculiar stewardship anxieties: “Why haven’t more of ‘them’ discovered the joy of tithing, the euphoria that results from faithful stewardship? Why don’t more of ‘them’ love Jesus more, why don’t they ‘get it’ when they say ‘All things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee?’” (I realize that doesn’t actually get said here, but you’re familiar with the words, I’m sure.)

Well ... there’s a certain cleansing effect from getting our anxieties out in the open, isn’t there? Yet, more basic than the different forms our anxieties about stewardship take, are the differences in our underlying perceptions of what stewardship *is*.

For starters, it’s certainly difficult to escape the impression that when we talk about financial stewardship, that’s just a euphemism for **keeping the institution going**—raising enough money, by any legal means, to pay the essential expenses of keeping the church up and running, providing “services” to its “clients.” When you turn in a pledge card, or drop an envelope into the offering plate, you’re just doing your part to ensure that

when the time comes for your spouse's funeral or your daughter's wedding, or your grandchild's baptism, Ascension and its clergy will be here to serve you on that occasion. There are differences in philosophy within this viewpoint: Some are only interested in giving enough to support a barebones budget that tries to cut corners whenever possible; others have a more generous vision of what the parish's mission and ministry is. Either way, however, it's institutional maintenance that we're talking about.

Now, I have to say, there are important elements of truth in this perception. Among other things, the church *is* an institution, and being an institution carries with it certain inherent costs. Roofs leak and air conditioners break down and plants need to be watered and organs need to be maintained. And if these costs are not met, the institution of the church is compromised, which compromises other aspects of what the church is.

There is also a way of understanding stewardship that comes at it from a distinctly spiritual direction. Stewardship is, quite simply, about **pleasing God**. When we give to the Church, we are actually giving to God; the church is only a conduit—a conduit, in fact, approved and sanctioned by God for such giving. Our giving has the *effect* of sustaining the institution, but that's not the reason we give. Still less do we have any intention of controlling the institution through our giving.

So...seeing stewardship as a matter not of institutional maintenance, but of pleasing God, is surely a step higher up the ladder of spiritual maturity. But there is yet, to borrow a phrase from St Paul, there is "a yet more excellent way." Christian stewardship, financial stewardship in particular, is one of the tools at God's disposal by which he fosters our **growth in holiness**. Stewardship is one of the means at *our* disposal by which we can **practice living in Heaven**. Heaven is our destiny, as the community of those who have been redeemed for God by the death and resurrection of Christ. But it is, for us, a foreign tongue and an alien culture. Practicing stewardship helps us learn that language and adopt that culture. In the sixteenth chapter of St Luke's gospel, Jesus tells his followers

He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and he who is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?

The invitation to stewardship is an opportunity to practice for the greater responsibilities God wants to give us in his kingdom. God gives us a little, that we may develop the skills to be entrusted with responsibility over much. God entrusts us with what is not actually ours, that we may show ourselves worthy to be entrusted with that which is, in fact, ours.

Many of us have made promises to God about what we would do if we were to win big on the lottery. I know I have! We've told God that, if we win the lottery, we'll give huge amounts to the church and to all sorts of other good causes. Sometimes I wonder whether the fact that I haven't yet won is a sign of something other than the astronomical odds against anyone doing so. God certainly knows me better than I know myself, and perhaps that's why I haven't won the lottery! (Of course, another reason is that I rarely buy a ticket—maybe once in a decade—but that's another matter!) God knows that we need to master addition and subtraction before we study calculus. We have to learn to be faithful

in little things—like the paycheck we get once a week or twice a month or whenever it is. Like the savings that we've accumulated. Like our time, our talents, and our abilities. Like our families and our job. Do we see these as "ours," as things that we're free to dispose of as we please? Or do we see them as "on loan" from a God who will one day demand an accounting?

By the way, do you know where the word "steward" comes from? The first syllable is from the word "sty," as in "pig sty." The second syllable, then, is "ward," or "warden." So, a steward is a "sty-warden," a "warden of the sty"—the one entrusted with the responsibility of taking care of the pig sty and its inhabitants! Of course, the word has picked up a few more connotations and nuances over the centuries, but realizing its humble origins helps put our invitation to stewardship in a proper perspective. When the day comes for all stewards to render an accounting for all that has been entrusted to them, will you and I be found to have been honest and faithful in our stewardship? Will we be ready to live in Heaven? Will we speak the language and know the culture? That is the question of the day. Amen.