

KEEPING OUR PROMISES

Augsburg College Chapel
September 22, 2006

Ephesians 3: 1-6
Luke 12: 42-48

- I want to talk with you this morning about the many gifts we have been entrusted with at this college – and about our roles as stewards of those gifts – so many examples I see of a truly “gifted” community – chapel messages, people, programs, relationships, neighbors – but I want to move us beyond the traditional sense that this is ours to care for and we should get busy to the question of what God expects of God’s faithful stewards...
- A wise pastor once taught me that Christian stewardship is too often grounded in the question, “what shall I give?” – the human question – when the question we need to ask is “what dare you keep?” – God’s question! What shall I keep? Turns our world upside down – which, of course, is exactly the point. {In my work as a fundraiser, I love to ask this question – and to imagine – perhaps with an apocalyptic sense of hope – that the answer will be just what it should be!}
- In 1931, the brilliant young American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, penned an essay for *The Christian Century* entitled “Is Stewardship Ethical?” and therein challenged the mainstream Protestant church in America to understand how it had allowed the claim of stewardship to become simply another way of talking about church giving campaigns, a means of sustaining the status quo, the loss of a sense of how a Biblical understanding of stewardship turns our world upside down.
- In recent years, a distinguished theologian, Douglas John Hall, who will visit campus in a couple of weeks as our guest speaker for the Christensen Symposium, has been a leading voice for this very same point. He teaches us that if we go back to scripture, we find a vision and practice of stewardship that runs counter to the simplistic, reductionistic economic model that too often stands in for genuine discipleship, faithful stewardship.
- Our scriptural passages for this morning raise the stakes for all of us as regards an understanding of stewardship as a faithful way of life, as a counter-cultural claim upon our ethics, as a vision of God’s intentions for God’s people in the world - and not simply as a convenient way for us go about business as usual – with the illusion that because we call it stewardship, it is what Jesus taught and God intended!
- In his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul claims his role as a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of the Gentiles, and assumes his responsibilities as a steward of God’s remarkable and grace-filled gospel, the good news of redemption and love. What a remarkable treasure Paul has been entrusted with on our behalf – for his “fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” The gift of a promise – which we now must keep, as Paul understood, on behalf of all God’s people.
- And in Luke’s gospel, we have perhaps the most well-known stewardship phrase in the Christian scriptures – “to whom much is given shall much be required” – but of course there is so much more there in Jesus’ parable. The steward – the slave entrusted with the riches of the household – is not someone who simply tithes or gives a little bit extra or who claims to watch over the household with a bit extra care. The steward is the

reflection of the claim of discipleship. “Truly I say to you, Jesus says, the master will set the steward over all his possessions.” And then the master will return time and again to see how well the steward has kept the promise entrusted to him – to care for the gifts and treasures of the household. No matter what we may think of the punishments meted out to the unfaithful steward, the message is clear that the claim of stewardship is serious and significant, it requires imagination and vigilance and obedience.

- I have recently returned to a wonderful little essay by Wendell Berry entitled “The Burden of the Gospel” wherein Berry reminds a group of seminarians that the radical claim of the gospel for those who believe requires a willingness to suspend our own, human, modern and postmodern notions that we can live up to God’s intentions by following our own paths. What if Jesus came today, Berry asks, and called us to the discipleship of stewardship? Would he be satisfied with our tithes, with our churchly giving campaigns, with our efforts to compromise the claims of stewardship in order to keep people in the pews? The work of the gospel – I might say the work of stewardship – is, according to Berry, a continuing education in the faith!
- So, what is our lesson plan? What might it look like to have our lives transformed by a gospel account of stewardship? In what ways does this understanding of stewardship offer a world-changing perspective on our lives as people of faith in the world? Let me suggest three simple lessons...
- *It is about being entrusted with other peoples’ stuff* – the Biblical understanding of stewardship is about how stewards are charged with caring for the master’s household – what does this claim mean for 21st century life at this college, in this neighborhood and city, in this world? (What will you keep?)
- *It is about an alternative view of our economic lives* – it takes the long view, it is social in its understanding of costs and benefits, and it is more concerned with concrete use value than the accumulation of property and wealth (Stackhouse) – economics as ethics rather than science, concern for eco-systems, the webs of relationships and commitments that more properly account for the richness of our common lives, how we participate in covenants rather than contracts, how we transform rather than transact
- *It is about a deeper understanding of the nature of work and vocation* – it affirms the worth of work – it links our work with the things we love – and as Wordsworth has written, “what we have loved, others will love, and we will teach them how.”
- *What does all this mean for Augsburg College* – for all of us – Regents, faculty, staff, students, alumni, citizens all, stewards all:
 - Remember that this is not ours – we simply have the privilege of being the caretakers of this college for this moment in time (eras of leadership and stewardship)
 - Build an economy of appropriate scale and with alternative measures of well-being – systems, people, etc.
 - Remember the promises we must keep in our work together, promises that are our personal callings as well as the vocation of this college – what are we for, how do we celebrate the link between love and work, how do we teach others to love what we love?
- To whom much is given shall much be required – this is the call of discipleship, a call that turns our world upside down, a call to do God’s work in the world (not ours!) - My fellow heirs of God’s grace, my brothers and sisters in Christ – this is the promise we have been given – this is the promise we must keep. Thanks be to God. Amen.