

Stewardship is a Choice
#3. What Kind of Church Will We Be?
Scripture: 2 Corinthians 8:1-15, Acts 20:32-35

This month we are talking about a very important word in the Bible that is used to describe us as Christians. It's the word "manager" or "steward". First Peter 4:10 says:

"Each one, as a good manager (steward) of God's different gifts, must use for the good of others the special gift he (or she) has received from God."

Now for the last two weeks, we have been applying that foundational Scripture to our individual lives. But today let's apply it to our life a congregation.

Here's the core issue. Stewardship is never about what we have as individuals or as a congregation. It is always about, *"What are you doing with what you have?"* What are you doing with the time, talents, treasures and spiritual gifts God has given you? Remember, the golden rule of stewardship is that God is the owner, we are only the managers of His things, of His gifts to us!

After 40 years of congregational ministry, here's what I know. The renewal of the Church in every generation depends on what kind of managers, or stewards, we are of the time, talents and treasures God has given us. If we are good managers of God's gifts to us, the church can do great things and have an amazing impact. We can make a real difference in the world. But if we are bad stewards, if we misuse and waste God's gifts to us, then the church becomes ineffective, and we miss out on the opportunity to be a blessing to others.

Here's how you tell the difference between a congregation that's got stewardship right, and one that has it wrong. The one that has it wrong is "inward focussed". Its members have decided that church is all us, our needs, our personal preferences, and about what happens in "our" building! It's a church that has turned in on itself and has no missional strategy. It's a church that puts a price on everything, and where its members think of its ministers as the *"hired help."*

Now I don't think St. Andrew's is like that, but it is a warning even to us that we do need to always be thinking about what kind of church we want to be because being good managers is always a choice. It is a choice for us as individuals. It is a choice for us as a congregation.

Let's go to Second Corinthians Chapter 8, in the New Testament. Here we find a church that chose to be a good steward, a good manager. Verse 1:

“Now I want you to know, dear brothers and sisters, what God in his kindness has done through the churches in Macedonia.”

The churches in Macedonia included those in Philippi, Berea, and Thessalonica which Paul established during his missionary journeys. Here’s what we’re told about them.

“² They are being tested by many troubles, and they are very poor. But they are also filled with abundant joy, which has overflowed in rich generosity.

³ For I can testify that they gave not only what they could afford, but far more. And they did it out of their own free will. ⁴ They begged us again and again for the privilege of sharing in the gift for the believers in Jerusalem. ⁵ They even did more than we had hoped, for their first action was to give themselves to the Lord and to us, just as God wanted them to do.”

Hard times had hit the church in Jerusalem and its surrounding areas. Although the Macedonian congregations were themselves being persecuted and were very poor, they rushed to help their fellow Christians in Jerusalem.

Do you remember how the Macedonian churches got started? Acts Chapter 16 tells us. The apostle Paul was trying to decide where to go next to share the good news of Jesus. Each time he made a decision, he sensed the Holy Spirit saying “Not there. There”. Much like the process ministers go through when they sense God’s call to a new ministry. Acts 16:9-10 records:

“⁹ That night Paul had a vision: A man from Macedonia in northern Greece was standing there, pleading with him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us!” ¹⁰ So we decided to leave for Macedonia at once, having concluded that God was calling us to preach the Good News there.”

“Come over and help us!” That’s how the Macedonian churches were started. Now these churches hear that the mother church in Jerusalem needs help. So they rush to do what they could.

We have two particular funds here at St. Andrew’s that relate to the work and needs of the wider Church. One is called *Presbyterians Sharing*. Every Presbyterian congregation across Canada and there are around 900 of them, – large and small – has what’s called a dollar base figure, based on its actual income.

Each year, a congregation is asked to give 10% of this dollar base figure to a fund we call *“Presbyterians Sharing”* for the work of the wider church. Based on our 2015 congregational income of \$314,090, our goal this year is to contribute \$31,409 or 10% to Presbyterians Sharing. A congregation with a

dollar base of \$150,000 would contribute \$15,000, one with a dollar base of \$50,000 would contribute \$5000.

This common sharing of resources allows our national church to be involved in a wide range of life-changing ministries across Canada and around the world. The guiding principle is, that we can always do more together than we can do individually.

The second fund we have as Presbyterians is called "*Presbyterian World Service and Development*." This is the humanitarian agency of our denomination. As individuals contribute to this fund we provide aid to people in times of conflict and disaster; we increase access to good drinking water and to better sanitation for those who live in communities, around the world, that lack these. We protect human rights, we help refugees, and in partnership with the Canadian Food Grains Bank, we provide food security for those who are hungry.

Here's what we need to recognize, especially given the wonderful people and financial resources of this congregation. **"The greatness of a church isn't in what it has. It's in what it gives away."** It's in the attitude and generosity of its people. As Jesus said, Acts 20:35:

'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Sutton, where Laura is preaching this morning, and our youth band is playing, is one of the smallest and poorest congregations in our Presbytery. But each week it provides a community meal for those who need a cooked meal and some fellowship. Sutton's church building needs a lot of work. It has less than 20 members. Its total revenue is around \$40,000. It has no minister. But it has what matters! A big heart! A generous heart! It's a Macedonian style church! It has little but it does much. It is not focussed on itself or its own needs.

According to Scripture the Macedonian congregations, like the one in Sutton, had four characteristics:

First. They gave despite their own problems. They didn't let these problems stop them from sharing what they could. Second. They gave willingly and sacrificially. Paul writes:

"For I can testify that they gave not only what they could afford, but far more. And they did it of their own free will."

Third, they understood that giving is a privilege and not an obligation.

"⁴ They begged us again and again for the privilege of sharing in the gift for the believers in Jerusalem. "⁵ They even did more than we had hoped for...."

Fourth, and this is the true principle of stewardship. Paul says:

"their first action was to give themselves to the Lord and to us, just as God wanted them to do."

There's the key right there, we can only be good managers and stewards when our first commitment is to Jesus as Lord. Everything we do as Christians should flow out of that relationship, because that determines our attitude, and the right attitude, leads to the right action, which leads to God's blessing.

There's the story of a minister who was discussing stewardship with one of her members. *"Farmer Bob, if you had a million dollars, would you give half of it to God."* *"Sure would, pastor"*, Bob replied. *"Farmer Bob, if you had 1000 cattle would you give half of them to God."* *"Sure would, pastor"*. *"If you had two hogs, would you give one of them to God?"* *"Now hold on, pastor"*, said Farmer Bob. *"Don't get personal. You know I have two hogs!"*

Great story! We're all pious about giving what we don't have. But God isn't interested in that. He's not interested in what we'll give him if we win the lottery or if more people join our congregation. He's only interested in what we're doing with what we have now. You see, giving is always a question of willingness, not of wealth. It is always a question of opportunity, not obligation. Stewardship is always a choice. Why? Because being a good manager of what God has given us is never a financial issue, or a time issue, or a talents issue. It is always a spiritual issue. It's the issue of us settling the question in our hearts and minds of who really owns what we have. Is it ours or is it God's? Confessing *"Jesus is Lord"* means that He is Lord of all. Lord of your life, your treasures, your time, your talents, your family, your work, your business, and your relationships.

The right attitude leads to the right action which leads to God's blessings. Let me tell you the true story of Helen Douglas. She was by far the poorest lady in her congregation, one that hit financial difficulties during a much-needed building project. So there was a special appeal. Helen put all the spare change she had in her purse in an offering envelope and wrote on it, *"Pastor, this is all I have to give."* Knowing her need, the pastor tried to persuade her to keep her gift, but she refused. The next Sunday, the results of the financial appeal were announced. The Pastor said, *"Praise God, we met our goal and let me tell you that the largest gift came from Helen Douglas. She gave \$3.30 which was all she had."* That's when someone stood up and said, *"Pastor give me 1c of that money and I will give you \$10.00."* Someone else said the same thing. And then another. And quickly

Helen's \$3.30 became a \$3,300 offering! The right attitude leads to the right action which leads to God's blessings. Always remember that.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Generous God, Source of every blessing, help us to count our blessings and to be surprised by every one of them.

Remind us, again and again, that every good gift and perfect present comes from you. Teach us, again and again, that it is more blessed to give than it is to receive.

Therefore, as you have loved us, may we extend that love to those around us.

As you have forgiven us, help us to forgive those who have sinned against us.

As you have blessed us, help us to share those blessings with others.

Today we thank you for every blessing you have given to us as a congregation and for every opportunity we have been given to be a blessing others.

We pray in grateful thanks for all the lives who have been touched by this congregation:

at a wedding or at a funeral:

through a gift from our Benevolent Fund, or the gift of Christmas hamper:

in a Boarding Home, or through a meal served at Inn from the Cold:

in aid given to those struck by hunger, or drought or natural disaster:

in fresh water flowing from a well in an African village,

or in children learning through an educational program offered in Afghanistan

or a refugee family sponsored so they might begin a new life.

Thank you, Lord, for your generosity to us, that enables us to be generous to others.

Thank you, Lord, for this congregation and its people and for the ministry you have given us both here and around the world.

Thank you for blessing us all so generously. In Jesus Name. Amen.