

“Stewardship Stories”

“And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches” (II Corinthians 8:1).

It’s been said, “the shortest distance between truth and a human being is a story.” Stories provide the backbone of our culture *and of our faith*. They teach us, they stir us, they show us a path that we would otherwise have missed and, as our opening proverb suggests, stories help us see truth. Today, we start a four-week emphasis on Christian stewardship and as we begin this journey I want you to understand that stewardship is all about stories. Our church defines stewardship as, “the free and joyous activity of the child of God in managing all of life and life’s resources for God’s purposes.” This summary may provide a basic understanding of what we mean by the word stewardship, but this definition doesn’t inspire or awaken the heart to the absolute *miracle* that Christian stewardship is in the life of the believer. You see Christian stewardship is nothing short of the presence and work of the Holy Spirit and to fully grasp the implications of this statement we need stories.

The apostle Paul understood the importance of stories when it comes to stewardship and, in today’s epistle reading from II Corinthians, that’s exactly how he begins. Paul writes: “And now, brothers, we want you to know about...the Macedonian churches” (II Corinthians 8:1). With these words, Paul starts a story that he hopes will help the congregation in Corinth understand their own story of stewardship and it’s also a story that we are going to use over the next three weeks to help us understand God’s presence and work in our lives as well.

To understand Paul’s story about the Macedonian churches we need a little background. You see, at this time in the history of the church, the Christians in Jerusalem were suffering. In the book of Acts we learn that there was a famine in the region where Jerusalem was located (Acts 11:29) and, to make things worse, the Christian church in Jerusalem was also under persecution. The city that had served as the very birthplace of the Church had turned on the followers of Christ. The Jewish leaders saw the followers of Jesus as a cult and blasphemous belief system that had to be destroyed and anyone who was thought to be connected to this movement was blacklisted. Pressured by the Jewish leaders, people refused to hire or do business with the Christians and in every way the Church in Jerusalem was ostracized from the rest of society. When you combine these economic factors with a famine, the first-century Christians in Jerusalem were in dire need...*and the Church responded*.

In today’s reading, Paul begins a section of II Corinthians that is the lengthiest discussion of stewardship in the entire Bible and his objective here is to encourage the wealthy Christians in Corinth to provide financial support to their brothers and sisters starving in Jerusalem and, to accomplish this goal, Paul tells them the story of the Christians in Macedonia.

These believers were located in the cities of Philippi and Thessalonica and we learn in verse two that they had also experienced persecution *and yet* Paul writes, “Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.” These Christians had endured some of the same difficulties and hardships as the Christians in Jerusalem and yet Paul tells us they gave generously, they gave beyond their means, and their contributions were more than Paul and his companions ever expected.

The stewardship story of the Macedonians teaches us many things. To the people of Paul’s day this was an extraordinary and inspirational story of giving to help those in Jerusalem with specific needs at a very specific time in history, *but this story also matters for us!* This story connects us to truths that have a profound impact on how we understand our own story as Christian Stewards and...*it all begins with God!* Listen again to how Paul introduces his story in the first verse of our text, “We want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.” As I said earlier, stewardship is all about stories and Paul’s words in verse one tell us clearly that, as believers, all of our stories begin with God’s grace. This truth is absolutely essential for a proper understanding of Christian stewardship because without it, a discussion of stewardship quickly turns into

nothing but a guilt-driven appeal to give more or do more or be more committed. That tactic may work in a political campaign, but that is not Christian stewardship!

You see, stewardship always begins and ends with the work of Christ! It is shaped by Christ! It is inspired by Christ and it is only in Christ that we can even begin to grasp the grace of giving. The truth is that we can never give more than Christ has given, we can never do more than Christ has done and we can never be more committed than Jesus. In today's reading from Isaiah Jesus Himself speaks about His journey to the cross in these words: "I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting" (Isaiah 50:6). And with a face "set like flint," Jesus gave everything for us and to us. On the cross, He took away our sin and it is here, in *this* grace of giving, that true stewardship begins...and this makes no sense to us!

If we are honest, this cross-centered grace of giving in which we now live and move and have our being goes against everything we are taught. We come into this life hard-wired with the basic principle that you get what you deserve and, from the time we are born into this world, the values of hard work and fairness govern the way we see the world. We do our chores and we get an allowance. We study diligently and we get a good grade. We work overtime and we get a bigger paycheck...but not only that! We also learn that when we talk back to the teacher, we get our name on board. When we stay out after our curfew, we get grounded. When we skip work, we get fired. In the world, we earn our way and we get what we deserve...*but that's not how God works!*

The scandal of the Gospel and the foundation of our faith is that we don't get what we deserve and instead we receive what we didn't earn and, frankly, didn't even want. In Romans, Paul gives us a glimpse of how God works when he writes, "God demonstrates His love for us in this: While we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). And the results of this unreasonable and unexpected grace of giving are the forgiveness of our sins and a life forever with God! Christ gave us what we didn't earn and could never accomplish and this grace has come to us without one ounce of effort on our part. It is ours with no strings attached, with no contribution on our part, and there is nothing we can do to change the fact that on the cross our sins were punished and in the blood of Jesus Christ we were reconciled to God.

This is the ultimate story of grace! It is the story in which we are forgiven and through which we have eternal life and when we understand this story it destroys us. It shreds our pride, it strips away our ideas of self-reliance and it leaves us with our hands empty and our hearts open to receive God's grace...and it is *here* that our life begins; it is here that our story as Christian stewards starts; and it is here that we find the Macedonians.

The story of the Macedonians is a story of grace. It is a story of the free and joyous response of Christian men and women who gave out of their extreme poverty, who urgently pleaded for the privilege of giving to the struggling saints in Jerusalem and who blew Paul away as they did not do as expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord...and this is our story as well. Over the next three weeks, we will hear the story of God's grace in the lives of people from our own congregation and, like the story of the Macedonians, the stories of these stewards will help us to see God's work and lead us to the grace of giving in a way that makes a difference in the world we have been called to serve.

The Psalmist writes, "O my people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter hidden things, things from of old...we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done" (Psalm 78:1-4). Through His Word, Christ is working in our lives and in your stories of grace, we will hear God's voice, we will be reminded of the wonders He has done and we will receive the unexpected, unreasonable and unforced grace of giving. Stay tuned. Amen.

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