

“Finish the Work”

“Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means” (II Corinthians 8:11).

Stewardship is, “the free and joyous activity of the child of God in managing all of life and life’s resources for God’s purposes.” Listen again to this definition: Stewardship is, “the free and joyous activity of the child of God in managing all of life and life’s resources for God’s purposes.” This may surprise you, but in this brief explanation of stewardship there’s no mention of money; there is no discussion of percentage giving here; the church budget isn’t brought up and the words “building fund” are nowhere to be found. Our financial giving is certainly an important part of our response as Christian stewards (and it was in Paul’s day as well), but to reduce stewardship only to a discussion of financial giving would be a gross misunderstanding of what Biblical, Christian stewardship is all about.

Stewardship is about life! It is encompassed in every aspect of who we are and what we do; it is expressed in how we handle adversity as well as prosperity; it is demonstrated in the words we use and in the ways we spend our time. Stewardship is precisely what Paul was talking about in Romans 12 when he said, “I encourage you brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship.” You see for the Christian, stewardship is living our lives in the light of God’s grace. It is holding every thought and decision and action captive and obedient to Christ (II Corinthians 10:5) and our understanding of Christian stewardship is grounded in *and finds its fulfillment* in God’s purposes.

In today’s reading from II Corinthians Paul talks specifically to the Corinthian Christians about finishing the work and, in this context, he is encouraging the wealthy Corinthians to complete the financial commitment they had made to provide assistance to the Christians in Jerusalem who were suffering from the results of persecution and famine. Here, Paul talks pointedly about money and there are times when “managing life’s resources” means giving money; this is a God-ordained and essential part of what it means to respond to God’s grace as a Christian Steward...*but it is only one part of stewardship* and today I want you to understand that Paul’s encouragement to “finish the work” doesn’t begin in the wallet...*it starts in the heart!* It begins in the place where God has planted us and in the relationships He has given us. It shows itself in our jobs as we use our gifts and talents to make a living but, just as important, Paul’s words imploring us to “finish the work” applies to our calling as friends and neighbors; as aunts and uncles; as brothers and sisters; as moms and dads; and, most intimately, as husbands and wives.

On March 16, 1963, Ron and Pat Doan were married at this altar. On that day nearly 50 years ago, and whether they knew it or not, they started a journey of stewardship. And that journey that began with these words: “for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness, and in health; until death parts us.” These are words of stewardship and, in a day and age where commitment is temporary and divorce is typical, we need to understand that “managing all of life and life’s resources” begins in the most fundamental parts of our lives. Today, we will see a picture of stewardship from the eyes of Pat Doan as she expresses what “finishing the work” has meant in her life as a Christian steward.

Ron and I brought his elderly mother into our home to care for her. She lived with us for 7 years, and we were her caregivers. The first few years went fairly well—she traveled with us and took care of her own daily needs. As her dementia worsened, so did my relationship with her. I found myself praying daily for strength, patience, and asking God to help me control my anger that kept creeping into my being. And, every day, I found blessed relief from our Heavenly Father.

In June 2010, I had to have knee replacement. Caregiving was taking its toll. It was very evident to Ron and me that we could no longer care for his mother, and we needed to find a good nursing home for her very soon. By August we placed her in the home, and I continued with my therapy and recovery. In February 2011, I had the second knee replaced. During each hospital stay, our pastors and lay ministers took turns coming up and praying with us; for my healing, care and recovery; and for Ron, as he was my coach and caregiver through it all. We were also on many prayer chains in several states, and family and friends were praying for us both. All those prayers were answered swiftly, and by spring I was back to gardening and getting around pretty well with these new knees. Life was good, and we were blessed. To God be the Glory!

Then, early in the morning on December 2, 2011, Ron suffered a stroke as the result of a heart attack during the night. I heard something fall, and when I went in the kitchen, he was standing there holding a jug of milk. He couldn’t move, and he couldn’t speak. I sat him down in his recliner and grabbed the phone and called 911, all the while praying for God to help him. When the ambulance was on its way I called our son and my brother, Dick, who also called Pastor Eggold. We all arrived at Parkview Main about the same time. Pastor led us in prayer for God’s healing hand, and for the doctors and nurses who were caring for him. As the news reached family and friends, Ron was put on many prayer chains all around the country. God was answering every prayer, as Ron seemed to be recovering rather quickly, even though he could barely speak, and had problems swallowing. He was alert and awake through it all. He said later that when he was in the emergency room and saw all of us with Pastor Eggold, he thought he was dying, then heard a voice inside saying, ‘You are going to be OK, just shut up and pay attention.’

Ron was in the hospital for five weeks, because he had a heart catheterization, a stent put in, which led to another stroke that affected his left side, followed by a hemorrhagic stroke that again affected his left side. He also suffered a seizure as a result of the third stroke. With each episode that sent him back to ICU, our pastors, Lana Hille, Jim Croxton and others were at the hospital as soon as they got each call of a set-back. More prayers were given for healing and for our Heavenly Father to also guide the doctors and nurses with Ron's care. He was a challenge. Oh, by the way—he's also diabetic, and they had to give him insulin injections, because he couldn't take any meds orally, and his sugars were all over the map.

Each day when I got home to shower, change, and take care of business, I would get on the computer and send an update to church, family, and friends. I would let everyone know that their prayers were felt, and God was answering each and every one. His grace and mercy are never ending. Miracles happen every day, and they certainly were happening there at the hospital. Every day I prayed for God's healing powers, and each time when I went back to ICU, he was improved. He was cracking wise with the doctors and nurses, and to anyone who would listen. After a pastoral visit, one of his nurses asked me how many pastors we had at our church. I said, "Enough." I also told her that we have several lay ministers, and they also make calls in hospitals and to shut-ins. She asked where we went to church and I told her, "Emmanuel Lutheran on West Jefferson." She knew right where it was.

We were still in the hospital over Christmas. Christmas Eve was very quiet and somber. We were both feeling somewhat depressed and kind of sorry for ourselves. We couldn't get to church. But Christmas Day was a celebration. My sisters and their husbands came up after church, and our son showed up soon after. Dick and Sharon arrived right after church. Then, Pastor Tom Eggold came. He read the Christmas story from Luke, and led us all in prayer—there were 10 of us altogether. Then we sang some Christmas carols. It was a joyful noise. Ron said that since we couldn't get to church, then church came to us. To God be the Glory. The next morning a nurse mentioned that she heard singing coming from the vicinity of Ron's room. I said, "That was us!" She said it was wonderful, and the patients within ear shot also enjoyed the singing. God is Good!

Ron soon made it back up to rehab for the last two weeks of his stay. One of rehab's nurses, Emmanuel member, Jule Shively, was a welcomed sight, as were the staff who applauded when he made it back up there. We knew we were in the home stretch. And, the prayers continued. I was staying with Ron every night—I just knew that he was still in a fragile state. The Holy Spirit gave me the guidance to know what to do and how to care for him and work with his doctors and nurses. It was my turn to be Ron's caregiver.

Prayers are powerful, and miracles happen every day. We are God's children, and our Heavenly Father loves us and takes care of us. Our Lord and Savior gives us comfort in his salvation and mercy. The Holy Spirit gives us guidance and strength. Ron mentioned to Pastor Art one day that it was weird how he would have a really bad episode of something, but right away he started getting better. Pastor Art said that maybe God wanted us to be His witnesses for someone at the hospital. And, that God uses His people to do His work.

The families of the ICU patients spent their time in the family lounge, waiting for our scheduled visits. We looked out for each other, and prayed for each other—we were also in crisis, along with our loved ones. It's not important to know why all this happened, but we thank God for the healing, the good care he received, and for all the prayers from everyone and visits from our pastors, staff, friends and family. Their compassion, prayers, communion, and encouragement are all gifts from our Heavenly Father—to HIM be the Glory.

As Pat mentioned, during Ron's hospitalization and recovery, she sent daily emails to update friends and family on Ron's status. Some of those emails communicated hope and joy, while others told a story of disappointment and pain. But regardless of where Ron and Pat were on that given day, Pat ended every email with these words: "God is good!" My friends, these words are the words of stewardship. They are words that acknowledge that our lives as God's children are found only in Christ; that in His death for us, our sins have been forgiven; that in His resurrection from the grave, our eternal future has been guaranteed; and that in His promises to us we can see every single day of our lives as a stewardship opportunity to be used for God's purposes. Despite our lack of faith...God is good! Despite our rejection of His word...God is good! Despite our failure as Christian stewards...God is good!

Today, as we gather around God's promises, some of you are in a place of disappointment, some of you are in place of pain. Some of you have made decisions that have severed relationships and some of you have turned your backs on God. *But you are here today!* And regardless of your past failures and even with your present doubts, God's message of grace in Christ is for you and today your life begins anew with these words: "God is good." By His grace, received through faith, you are a steward who can finish the work God has given you. Go with the peace and strength of Christ in and for you. Amen.

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold and Mrs. Pat Doan