

Oikonomos

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Grace Presbyterian Church
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I want to begin with just a few brief quotes this morning:

“When I hear the word...I want to run.”

“The word triggers in me an unbearable sense of duty and guilt.”

“Oh no!”

“Not again!”

These were all **actual, honest, gut-level responses** written on blank slips of paper when parishioners of churches in an Anglican diocese in Canada were asked by surveyors to respond to the word.... “Stewardship.” In all, fully one third of the ninety people surveyed expressed strongly negative associations with the word. Others saw it as a sort of a necessary evil, the way I might imagine people responding to the word, “Flossing.” Two of the more succinct responses were simply, “Collection plate,” and most pointedly, “Dammit!”¹

As he reports these findings in his book, The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age, theologian Douglas John Hall says that churches are in part to blame for this negative sentiment. We have given up much of the larger THEOLOGICAL meaning of stewardship as a way of life or as a lived expression of faith, and we have reduced it to a PRACTICAL matter of giving to support the church

¹ Douglas John Hall, The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age Revised Edition (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, Publishers, 2004) p. 14

budget, or of offering in-kind support through volunteering our talents or our labors. And budgets going up, as they do, many people feel that the church is always asking for more, more, more. We even have a “stewardship season,” or a “stewardship emphasis” in many churches, so that there is little to distinguish our activity of stewardship from the annual fund drives at PBS, NPR, the Alumni fund at our Universities, or the Police and Firemen’s Benevolence Associations. With this mindset, “steward” has come to mean little more than “donor” or “giver.” And stewardship essentially means pledge drive.

A little linguistic study will show us just how wrong this understanding of the word is, however.² Hall begins by exploring the English word “steward.” When it first began appearing in manuscripts around the 11th century, the word was not found in its present form, but instead was written and pronounced as “stigweard.” Stig referred to a house or a building and weard—later ward or warden--meant “keeper.” So, a stigweard was not a donor or a giver, but a house-keeper—not in the sense of a cleaning service, but in the sense of a house manager.

In the Joseph narrative found in the 43rd and 44th chapters of Genesis, where Joseph is an officer in pharaoh’s household, the Bible speaks of Joseph having a “steward of his house”—that’s the English translation. The Hebrew term it translates is *asher al bayit* or (one who is over a household). Similarly, in the New Testament, the term rendered as steward is *oikonomos*—from *oikos*,

² The linguistic study that follows is found on pages 40-41 of *The Steward*, previously cited.

household, and nomos, or order. The steward, in other words, keeps the house in order, minds the affairs or belongings of the householder. The steward is the most highly capable and the most highly trusted servant of the house.

And the work of stewardship is God-given work. If we go back to the beginning, to the foundational story of creation set forth in Genesis, the work of tending God's creation is the first and only task given to humanity. The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it. Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone—I will make him a helper as his partner." So, think of that for a moment—we're going all the way back to the igniting spark of our existence. God creates—well, the CREATION, the heavens and the earth, the flora, the fauna, the terrifyingly beautiful, amazing, astonishing, wonder that is the world—and then God creates Adam and Eve, man and woman, ish and ishah in Hebrew, and God says to them "Tend what I have created." This is EVERYTHING. Care for it. It is your *raison d'être*, your reason for being, your God-given task. And THAT—that sacred trust, that crowning honor...we have reduced that to "Collection Plates" and "Dammit?!?"

We need to get back into the Psalms—when words become routine, get back into poetry, when language becomes earthbound get back into praise, when you need to get back to speech that is with and about God, get back into the Psalms, the prayerful poetry of God's people. I'll start with the opening verses of Psalm 24--The earth is the

LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.

That's the first thing we need to know, to realize, to recognize, to internalize—we own nothing, we're entitled to nothing, it ALL belongs to God. And we belong to God.

That is so elemental, fundamental, foundational that we forget it. It's easy to forget because we're capable of a lot. We have conquered Mount Everest. God made Mount Everest. We have flown to the moon. God hung it in the sky. We have replicated life in a test tube. God created life.

It is an old joke—you've likely heard it—but I'll tell it anyway. A group of scientists decided that they had advanced and progressed to the point that there was no more need for God. "You've had a good run, God," they allowed, "but really, we have discerned the very building blocks of life, unraveled the mysteries and the elegant strands of DNA, discovered the atom and then split it, we can create life, sustain life, end life. You've become an entertaining anachronism, God." And God listens patiently and says, "Wow. That's impressive. It is. But can you form a human being from dirt, like I did in the beginning?" "Why of course," they said, eagerly bending over to scoop up some soil.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait." Said God. "Go get your own dirt." Okay. It's a joke and maybe not even that good of a joke.

But it captures the words of the Psalmist— “The Earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it.”

It puts us in our place, so to speak, it restores our perspective. We don’t own the dirt. We tend it. But having restored our perspective a bit, we turn to Psalm 8. “When I look at YOUR heavens—the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that YOU have established.... what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet. Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion (it means governance, rule, responsibility, control) you have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet.

You have made them keepers of the household of God, tenders and tillers of your garden; stewards. Here is my precious creation, here is the gift of life itself. Manage it well.

That’s what stewardship is. We’ve reduced it to budgets and pledge cards?

Well, as I was pondering this week what it means to be managers of God’s household, I came across a little scrap of paper. It was among some papers that had been saved by Amy’s mom, Amy going through the papers had set it aside, and I found it on the table, picked it up and glanced over it. In Gayle’s familiar writing were several quotes that she had found to be meaningful—and one of them caught my eye. It was unattributed—but it said “We shape our

dwelling...and afterwards our dwellings shape us.” We shape our dwelling and afterwards our dwellings shape us.

And that clicked somehow with all of my thoughts on stewardship—here is the world for you to tend...here is a dwelling for you to live in and to shape. You can determine what is valuable. You can determine what is important. You can determine what you will do and not do. You are the oikonomos, the keeper of household order...do you hear the word English word hidden away in the Greek there, by the way? Oikonomos—economics?

And that means that everything you do, how you order your life, is stewardship. And everything that you do and choose—shapes the dwelling that shapes you. How you spend your time, what you choose to spend it on...that will shape you. Do you want to shape a life of hurry and rush and striving after wind? A life of bigger, better, faster, more? You can do that. But it will shape you. Our stewardship of time forms us—our children—our families. If Someone looked at your day timer—or at mine—what would they see that I held up as most important? What does my calendar hold sacred?

Our budget—it also shapes us. What sort of life is my budget shaping? Does it value neighbor, and nature, does my consumption treat creation kindly, do I use the resources I have been given oversight of to make the world a better place? Our economic decisions shape the world...and then the world shapes us. What does my budget hold sacred?

And while I'm on the topic of stewardship and the life that we shape...Tuesday is election day. And voting is an act of stewardship—of responsibility. With my vote, I lift up what I cherish, what I respect, what I hope to be seen as most important—voting is one of the most vital acts of stewardship we can undertake. What do I want my country to look like—who do I trust to lead and to represent me, faithfully and well. With our votes we shape our dwelling—and then our dwelling shapes us. What does my vote hold sacred?

I began this sermon by saying that people don't like even to talk about stewardship—it is because we've made the concept so terribly small...small enough to fit into our wallet.

Me? I want a Psalm 8 vision of stewardship—big enough to fill a lifetime--one that remembers that the world is God's and my life is a wonder, and as small as my life is, I've been honored with the most sacred of trusts—the tending and nurture of all that is God's. When I look at your heavens.... the work of your fingers.... the moon and the stars that you have established...what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them...yet.

You have made them a little lower than God. You have crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands.....

You have named them---oikonomos, keepers of your household, shapers of the dwelling that will shape us and our children. Stewards. Amen.

