

“God’s Delight”

Matthew 11:28-30, Philippians 1:6, *Isaiah 40:28-31, 52:7, 55:12, 2 Corinthians 9:7*
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Pastor James York

Thirteen days ago I went on a bike ride pondering, what God wants to say to us about stewardship. As I turned onto the trail, into a brisk headwind, my muscles were cold and sore, my knee ached and my back was stiff. My body screamed at me to go home. I pushed on laboring against the incline of the century bridge. My thoughts shifted to all of the things I needed to get done, the pain, suffering, and struggles that you have shared with me and your requests for prayer. I had so many questions about all the mess in the world. Questions about my own struggles and pain. I prayed for you, others, and myself. Why is life so hard? Why can you work so hard and still everything falls apart? Why can you love deeply and still the relationship gets rocky? Why is there disease? Why do children suffer? Why are people hungry? Why is there hate? Why do people hurt each other?

That is when it hit me. Stewardship is perseverance, riding a bike when you want to lie on the couch, watch football, and eat cookie dough is also perseverance. I ride because I know the exercise will give me strength and energy to love and serve. Stewardship is faithfulness, trusting that in the midst of your pain, struggle, and questions, God is with you and will create something good out of our experiences. Stewardship is pushing forward, giving, sacrificing to serve others. Stewardship is having confidence that God is magnifying the love you share, that in God’s perfect timing love will overcome all the world’s hate and fear, that your giving of money and time will someday feed the world, meeting every need, and healing every hurt.

The Biblical story of Job popped into my mind. Job was a man striving to live God’s will, a wealthy farmer, with a big family, a loving wife, a passionate worshipper of God, who gave generously. Job lost everything. His children all died in a collapsed house. His wife became bitter. His health deteriorated into agonizing, pain filled days, yet Job refused to abandon his faith in God. As Job struggled with a multitude of why questions, his friends tried to provide some answers. God scolded Job’s friends for trying to provide answers as they were trying to justify the situation. Job continued to be a sacrificial giver. Job persevered. Job kept his confidence in God. Job was faithful, continuing to love God and others, continuing to worship God.

Perhaps the story of Job today would be an active elder in church, who serves in a variety of ways and is in praising God every week in worship. She is a very successful businesswoman, the CEO of a rapidly growing company. She gives generously to the church and a variety of charities both with time and money. Suddenly, she has a terrible day. The company is bought out by a larger company. She is unemployed and unable to find a job. Her children are all killed in a car accident. Her husband divorces her. She is stricken with a flesh eating virus. Some in her church are afraid to visit her for catching the virus. Others don't come because they don't know what to say. Others try to give answers for her tragedies. Others tell her to curse God for her misfortune. Yet she continues to worship God and has hope. She continues to love those who have abandoned her. She continues to give sacrificially.

Next the biblical story of Jacob popped into my mind. He was a man who wanted to live out God's will yet was failing miserably. Jacob was greedy, a con artist, a hot head with a quick temper. He blamed others for his mistakes. His abrasive personality drove others away from him. Despite all of his faults Jacob yearned to be a better person. He wanted to make peace with his brother. Jacob longed for a do over, a way to make things right. Jacob was troubled, tossing and turning in his sleep, he couldn't settle the thoughts, feelings and physical tension. God sent an angel to wrestle with Jacob. Was it a wrestling match of thoughts? Was God enabling Jacob to see his faults, forgiving every mistake and showing him how to live? Was it a wrestling match of feelings? Was God freeing him from anger, sadness, depression and guilt? Filling him with joy, peace, grace and love. Was it a physical wrestling match? Helping Jacob realize that God is in control. As the sun dispersed the darkness, Jacob became a changed person. He made peace with his brother. He became passionate in his worship of God. He started following God's will. He became a sacrificial giver. The change was so abrupt that his name was changed from Jacob to Israel. His generosity and worship was the inspiring foundation for an entire nation.

Next the words of Jesus ran through my mind. Jesus said **“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.”**

Jesus came to support us, cry with us, and to struggle with us until God redeems us and the world. Jesus came because we are tired, at times, overwhelmed. Jesus came because we are sometimes worn out by the mess in our lives and in the world. Jesus came because we are burnt out on religion.

Even in the church at times we fight, hurt one another and make it difficult to connect with God. In time God will perfect us and the entire cosmos and everything and everyone will be glorious. Until then we are to partner with Jesus in serving, giving, helping, welcoming, forgiving and loving. We are to join Jesus in sacrificial giving. Jesus was in agony in the garden of Gethsemane yet Jesus willing, and freely sacrificed his life for us, so all of us can rise with Jesus in glory. Jesus knows what it is like to be in your skin. If you invite Jesus, he will come alongside you, be your partner, bearing with you all your burdens, guiding you to abundant life.

Next God placed in my mind the image of Jesus washing the disciples dirty, disgusting, stinky feet. Jesus commanded us to wash each others feet, to love and serve one another no matter how repulsive the other seems to us.

At times I have been in all of these places. Perhaps you know them as well. Times when we are grieving death, loss, broken relationships, deteriorating health, and failed dreams, yet we keep hoping. Times when nothing makes sense, when we are overcome with questions and with doubt, yet we keep praying. Times when, despite our best effort, we make mistakes, hurt people we love, and are unsure how to reconcile with others. Even still, we continue to love. Times when we are tired, worn out, burnt out, stressed out, unsure what God wants us to do, yet we keep praising God. Times when you do not feel liking loving that person who hurt you, yet you forgive them. Times when you would rather upgrade your car than give to the church. Times when you would rather enjoy a hobby than volunteer your time. Times when you would rather go to Hawaii than help others in need. Times when you would rather stay in bed than get up and serve others.

This week you should have received a mailing with a sacrificial giving pledge card. There are many seasons of life when our giving is an arduous sacrifice.

The squeal of two turkeys standing in the midst of the trail startled me. Head down, pondering sacrificial giving, I was unaware of my surroundings. There was something beautiful about these plain birds that seemed to put the effort of their whole body into every step. Their neck bobbing, rocking side to side, as they scampered off the trail. I looked ahead, standing in the middle of the trail was a deer, looking right at me, ears up. He turned, flashed his white tail, and seemed to fly as he leapt into the woods. For the first time I noticed the spectacular fall colors, the red sumac, the rust colored oak, the shimmering green of the weeping willow, the vibrant orange of the maple, the contrasting green of the pine, the white bark of the birch with their yellow leaves fluttering. The prophet Isaiah's words came to

mind **“You will live in joy and peace. The mountains and hills will burst into song and the trees of the field will clap their hands!”**

Suddenly the sun came out. The warmth hugged my skin. The world burst into Technicolor. Two Blue Jays zigzagged in front of me then soared into the sky. There was a frolicking black squirrel. On my right was the reddish, orange cardinal family. On my left a pond and meadow. The trail tunneled through a canopy of trees where the chatter of birds cheered me on. A farmer was filling his grain bin with dancing kernels of yellow corn that sang as they tumbled along. I was now coming home, the wind at my back, the trail going downhill. Effortlessly I sped along seemingly soaring. The prophet Isaiah words came to my mind. **“The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. God does not faint or grow weary; God’s understanding is unsearchable. God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”** I breathed deep, amazed at how much abundance God creates in the cosmos. I need only minuscule breaths of air yet the entire earth is surrounded with air. I am so blessed to have a wonderful loving wife, two great, healthy, talented kids, and to be able to serve with you, a wonderful congregation.

God revealed God’s intent for stewardship. God delights in being an extravagant, generous giver. God desires for us to experience the joy of giving. God is so powerful that God burst the entire cosmos into ever expanding existence. God is so precise that there is order in the tiniest building block up through the orbiting galaxies. God is so creativity that the entire cosmos is full of variety. God is so joyful that God gave us senses, taste to delight in our favorite food, smells to enjoy, sight to marvel, touch to cuddle into a hug, sounds to kindle our dancing. God is so thoughtful that God made each of us a unique masterpiece. God is so loving that God made us in God’s image and gave us each free will so we can choose to love God back. God gives everything to us. God delights when we enjoy God’s gifts. Everyday God gives us a fresh start as the sun warms and enlightens all of creation. Everyday God is asking, “Do you like the cosmos? I made it all for you.” When you enjoy God’s gifts and the life God gives you, God smiles. When you share, God is delighted.

Scripture declares **“God takes pleasure in a cheerful giver.”** Stewardship is enjoying God’s gifts until you delight in joyfully giving. Stewardship is a person who God gifted to be an artist seeing a sight so beautiful that their hands create a masterpiece delighting others. Stewardship is a person gifted with talent, who practices until they delight in the perfect swing that sends the ball soaring. Stewardship

is a composer hearing harmony, giving a song to a musician, who brings a melody alive in us, stimulating our delight. Stewardship is a parent lovingly nurturing a child bursting from the delight they enjoyed when they gazed into the eyes of the baby that God gifted them. Stewardship is a hobby that creates things that bring joy to others. Stewardship is a person filled with the peace of God, confident that with their service and God's help we can all enjoy peace on earth. Stewardship is a teacher who teaches with passion knowing that each student is created in the image of God capable of abundant good. Stewardship is a friend who cherishes their friendship with Jesus enabling them to listen and point out how God is loving you into a more beautiful person. Stewardship is a pastor who opens their senses, perceives God, then shares their experience of God. Stewardship is a person who realizes they have been blessed to be able to work or make things, or serve others, or give money so they work, delighting in make all of our lives better. Stewardship is a person who accepts God's gifts, who enjoys God's blessings so much so that they abound in blessing others. Stewardship is finding so much delight in knowing Christ that you relish showing Christ. Stewardship is being an extravagant dreamer. The Apostle Paul says **"I am confident of this that God who began a good work among you will bring it to completion"** Stewardship is anytime we perceive just a snippet of the wonder, glory and majesty of the world, enjoy it and are inspired to share. Stewardship is anytime we feel grace, love or joy and then share. Stewardship is being in awe of all God lavishly gives us so we can have abundant life and discover the joy of giving like God gives. Stewardship is giving with confidence knowing that God will multiply every loving gift, that in time all will be redeemed and earth will be as glorious as heaven. Stewardship is splashing in the waters of baptism, plunging into God's grace, enabling you to forgive others. Stewardship is feasting at the Lord's Table, delighting in the seat God made for you so you can go out and nourish others, inviting them to enjoy their spot in God's family.

Many of the sermons I write are arduous to create, the praying, meditating on scripture, reading, thinking, pondering, praying, writing, rewriting, striving to strip out my biases in order to let God's will emerge, praying, striving to keep my thoughts from distorting the truth, editing, second guessing. Many sermons are a long 20 hour process of sacrificial giving. Every so often a sermon is a delight, a giving of a gift from God that pops into my mind after God almost knocks me off my bike with a wild turkey, dazzles me with beauty and makes me aware of the love of family. In life we all have seasons of both types of stewardship: Times when giving is a sacrificial chore that stretches and grows us: Times when giving is a joy overflowing from all God is giving us.

I suspect Jesus, fully human, had to urge himself to wash the disciple's feet, to serve them, to be a giving steward, to sacrifice for them and us. He was tired, the floor was hard, his back hurt, the smell was repulsive and these feet would get dirty again. We keep making the same mistakes.

I suspect Jesus, fully God, marveled at the beauty of each foot, how each one God took the time to make distinctive, how God made unique gifts and joys, for every person, how each person can be like God by joyfully giving and extravagantly loving. Jesus, fully God, perceived so much beauty and potential he joyful scrubbed every foot. The prophet Isaiah declares **“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the messenger who brings good news, the good news of peace and salvation.”** Jesus, fully God, delighted in serving, in giving, in washing feet for Jesus knew every gift of love would be magnified, glorified, perfected and shine forever.

May God bless us all with the perseverance to sacrificially give through our challenging seasons. God is proud of us when we do and blesses that giving. God takes pleasure in our cheerful giving, in the seasons when we are able to perceive and savor God's gifts, overflowing us with love, enabling us to delight in giving to others. Stewardship is an invitation to joy, an invitation to reflect God's image, an invitation to plant a seed that God will grow into blessings beyond our grandest dreams. God delights in your cheerful giving. Amen