

“Stewardship: A Change of Heart”

Matthew 6:1-4, 16-21, 24-30

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God is constantly offering us peace, urging us to be not afraid and do not worry. God invites us to journey beyond fear and worry escaping anxious paralysis to soar on the wings of grace. Beyond fear we discover wonder filled blessings, enduring peace, abundant life, exuberant joy, and everlasting love.

Jack London wrote, “I would rather that my spark should burn out in a brilliant blaze than it should be stifled by dry rot. I would rather be a superb meteor, every atom of me in magnificent glow, than a sleepy and permanent planet. The function of a person is to live, not to exist. I shall not waste my days trying to prolong them. I shall use my time.”

Jesus said, **Matthew 6:24-30 NLT** “No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and be enslaved to money. “That is why I tell you not to worry about everyday life—whether you have enough food and drink, or enough clothes to wear. Isn’t life more than food, and your body more than clothing? Look at the birds. They don’t plant or harvest or store food in barns, for your heavenly Father feeds them. And aren’t you far more valuable to God than they are? Can all your worries add a single moment to your life? “And why worry about your clothing? Look at the lilies of the field and how they grow. They don’t work or make their clothing, yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are. And if God cares so wonderfully for wildflowers that are here today and thrown into the fire tomorrow, God will certainly care for you. Why do you have so little faith?”

Stewardship is a change of heart from fear and worry to bold love and adventure. Riding my bicycle fills me with joyful, energetic life, and connects me with God. I have always known there are risks to riding my bike; so, I wear a helmet, signal my intentions, and keep my brakes well maintained. I have studied and learned the best ways to fall by tucking in my arms and curling my body. My bike accident has not reduced my desire to ride my bike. In fact, I hope to get cleared to ride again tomorrow. Riding with Paul is at the top of my list.

A snippet of fear motivates one to be careful. Keep fear in check by being aware of the risks, learn how to minimize the risks, be prepared, avoid over thinking, then set off on your adventure. Being a good steward of one’s time means living abundantly, trying things, taking risks, loving in new ways and discovering hidden talents. Jesus came to fill us with joy, to make us fully alive, to enable us to enjoy the thrill of living.

Often when we are on the cusp of a wonder filled experience fear tries to stop us. At Christmas and Easter, angels were sent to numerous people often with the greeting, “Do not be afraid!” to prepare them for the glory they were about to enjoy.

“Be not afraid!” does not say no fears, rather we do not need to be our fears that is limited, confined, imprisoned by fear. I am afraid every time I share my perception of God’s word for you. A little fear pushes me to do my best. However, almost every week I share a message with you keeping me from being my fears.

Fear can quickly entangle one in a downward spiral. Parker Palmer gives an example how it often only takes a simple step to overcome fear which moves one into life giving stewardship. Parker wrote, “In a group of experienced K-12 teachers I worked with for two years was a high school shop teacher, six feet six inches tall, weighing 240 pounds, athletic and deep of voice. No one ever thought of this man as afraid, not even the man himself. For several years, the principal at his school had been pressing the teacher to attend a summer institute on technology. The shop curriculum, said the principal, had to be modernized, and quickly, or the students would be lost in the past. Nonsense, this fearless teacher replied. The technology touted at that institute is probably just a fad. Even if it isn’t, high school students need to learn the basics – hands-on work with materials and tools. There will be plenty of time later on for fancy refinements of their techniques. The shop teacher and his principal became locked in a demoralizing cycle of demands and refusals, each exacerbating the other. Their relations grew adversarial and strained. As the shop teacher participated in our group, that brokenness weighed heavy on his heart. Then one day the shop teacher came to a meeting and told us that the cycle had been broken. His principal had called him in to make his demands once more. This time, instead of arguing the merits of traditional shop curriculum, the teacher looked at his principal and said, “I still don’t want to go to that institute,

but now I know why. I'm afraid – afraid I won't understand it, afraid my field has passed me by, afraid I am a has-been as a teacher." There was a silence, and then the principal spoke: "I'm afraid, too," he said. "Let's go to the institute together."

They did, and they reclaimed and deepened their friendship, and the shop teacher feels he is making progress toward modernizing the curriculum and revitalizing his vocation.

This teacher's breakthrough did not directly involve adopting a new technique for teaching; indeed, it did not directly involve doing anything at all. His breakthrough was into a new way of being, into the realization that he could have fear but did not need to be fear – that he could speak and act from a place of honesty about being fearful rather than from the fear itself. The shop teacher honored a yearning within himself that was just behind, or ahead of, his fear, the yearning not to be cut off from his principal, his students, his world of work, or his teacher's heart. Sometimes the way beyond fear is just that simple."

Stewardship is a change of heart from fear to wholeness that enables one to fully live, shine and share. The glory of God is a person fully alive.

We are created and designed to love God, love all people and love all of creation. Fear hampers love. Fear breaks relationships. Fear twists our desire for connectedness, deceiving us to think that a healthy relationship requires us to be worthy, that we somehow need to earn love. Jesus warns us of trying impress others. Jesus invites us to find the joy of being in loving relationships. **Matthew 6:1-4 NLT "Watch out! Don't do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven. When you give to someone in need, don't do as the hypocrites do—blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity! I tell you the truth, they have received all the reward they will ever get. But when you give to someone in need, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Give your gifts in private, and your Father, who sees everything, will reward you."** Matthew 6:16-18 NRSV "And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." Matthew 6:19-21 NLT "Don't store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be."

The word translated as hypocrite originally referred to an actor who put on a mask. It is a mask of fear and worry. One is fearful that they are not loveable, that they do not belong. They are worried that they will be judged, so they call attention to their good deeds in hopes of earning love. The purpose of the spiritual practice of giving for the individual giver is to change one's heart from fear to gratitude for all one has, to joyful giving, which creates peace in the individual. The purpose of the spiritual practice of giving for the community creates equality, shared resources, and creates worldwide peace. The purpose of the spiritual practice of fasting is to remind us that all of our needs our meant by God, fasting makes space and time to love God and love others. Fasting can take many different forms. My bike riding and hiking is fasting from electronics and human sounds creating space for me to hear God. Putting oil on one's head was a sign of joy. Giving and fasting should help us become fully alive setting us free to connect, to love God, love all people, and love all of creation.

G. K. Chesterton urges us to "let your religion be less a theory and more of a love affair." Craig Dykstra writes, "Christian practices are not activities we do to make something spiritual happen in our lives. Nor are they duties we undertake to be obedient to God. Rather, they are patterns of communal action that create openings in our lives where the grace, mercy, and presence of God may be made known to us. They are places where the power of God is experienced. In the end, these are not ultimately our practices, but forms of participation in the practice of God." Barbara Brown Taylor notes, "My life depends on engaging the most ordinary physical activities with the most exquisite attention I can give them. My life depends on ignoring all touted distinctions between the secular and the sacred, the physical and the spiritual, the body and the soul. What is saving my life right now is becoming more fully human, trusting that there is no way to God apart from real life in the real world." Stewardship is a journey that involves overcoming fear and letting go of possessions, so one is free to joyfully live and love.

Stewardship is life giving like breathing. Receiving blessings from God and sharing blessings, a steady exchange of essential elements uniting the cosmos. So, to receive is only half the gift. The other half is that we can also give, therefore we can feel the joyful love of God flow through us for God is grace. God loves everyone. God gives abundantly. Stewardship is about becoming, doing, and changing whatever it is that is blocking the fullness of life in us.

The opposite of stewardship is playing it safe, retreating to your home, living a routine life, and building up your wealth. Stewardship is overcoming your fear to live fully alive, to try new things, to nurture new talents, to deepen relationships and make new friends.

I still can remember how terrified I was to ask Leslie out on a date. As my love for Leslie grew, my fear subsided. The more I love her the more of her beauty I discover. The more I love her the more I discover about myself which allows me to be more open and vulnerable, making me a better person. My love for Leslie is an ever-growing spiral that deepens my joy. My love for Leslie invigorates me with excitement for I know we have wonderful adventures to enjoy together, that our love for each other makes each of us a more whole, complete and a blessed person, which grows our blessing of others. A paradox that God blesses us with is the more we love, the more love we have to give. In loving we discover and enjoy abundant life. However, none of this happens until one takes a risk and overcomes their fear.

Regarding money stewardship is stifled by the fear of not having enough. The Israelites hoarded manna for they feared tomorrow's nourishment. The rich man worked hard all his life to build bigger barns to store an ever-growing stockpile of wealth. He thought to himself that he would start really living when he had enough. Unfortunately, it was never enough for him. He died before he ever really lived. He never experienced the joy of giving. He never delighted in being gracious.

To overcome our fear of not having enough God recommends two things. First gratitude. Focus on all you have. List your blessings. Thank those who make your life better. Second give to others first and then do your budget on what remains. Living a simpler life with less stuff creates more space to enjoy life and giving. Most people discover they become more fully alive by giving than by attaining another possession. Experiences are more precious than possessions.

Giving from the leftovers of your time, talents, and money is arduous. Prioritizing your time, then spending your time on what is life giving to you, will fill you with joy revealing an ever-growing array of your God given talents. Giving from the top of your paycheck makes you gracious, filling you with the joy and life of God. Giving is a joyful dance that creates excitement in sharing, fills you with abundant life, and open you to ever greater experiences of love. Imagine God's smile as you become gracious like God. Imagine God's delight when you discover that giving love enables you to fully enjoy life. Amen