

HOLD ON

Stewardship Sunday, more often than not, is about your money, and it is a bit intimidating to talk about someone else's money.

To make matters worse, I'm not astute about financial stuff.

I tried to take an Economics class at university, but dropped it.

It was all about numbers, and such.

The focus, in the past, used to be all about tithing--giving 10 %, yet few people every did.

Peter Marshall, a famous preacher back in the 1940s, had this story about tithing:

After a sermon on tithing, a prominent and wealthy member of the church came to Peter's office, and confessed, "I used to tithe, but now I make 1/2 million dollars a year. I can't afford to tithe \$50,000. Peter said, "I understand; that IS a lot of money, and I can see that you are greatly bothered by this. May I say a prayer for you."

The man agreed. Peter prayed, "God you know this man's problem, and I pray that you reduce his salary back to the point where he can afford to tithe, again."

That's not what the man wanted to have happen, yet Peter understood the bigger picture.

A tithe was the benchmark set by a religious community to support the system, and in OT times that included the government. It was like a tax.

Traditionally, Mennonites have maintained a similar attitude.

Members of the Mennonite community were expected to pay their dues / their fair share. And, that mind-set still affects our feelings about church finances. Yet, that perception diminishes God's part, and besides, if God was concerned about paying the bills, then it would be much simpler for God to bypass humans altogether.

Actually, money is a very minor part of stewardship. Stewardship includes all our resources and abilities, and more importantly, it is about our relationship with God and life itself.

Stewardship is a soul issue, and fully grasping it is parallel to a personal enlightenment / a rebirth. Stewardship is that important, so let's look at the passages for insight.

The Deuteronomy text reminds us that we did not earn our resources, possessions and money on our own merit,..... contrary to what most people like to think.

The affluent take pride in "earning" their wealth, and are thus "entitled" to control it. But, that's not the case.

There are scores of impoverished people who work as hard or harder, and as smart as most millionaires.

Many variables contribute to one being financially successful, including family support and luck. So, call it "good" fortune, Not earned fortune.

Plus, as the 1 Timothy passage stresses, the affluent should not think themselves better than others or deserving of their lot in life. And, it emphasizes that we should be rich in what really matters, such as generosity, good deeds, and so forth.

Moreover, Deuteronomy points out that all those abilities and opportunities that helped us accumulate "stuff" come from God.

We should not / can not take the credit,..... and if we have trouble believing that....., as Deut. notes, then we have a soul survival problem / a salvation problem.

According to the dictionary, Stewardship means:

The duties of a steward who is a person who manages someone else's property, financial affairs, estate, etc.

And, that is precisely the message in the Deut. text. All "our" possessions and money is,..... well,..... not ours, ...unless we want to push God out of the loop.

No doubt, the Bible is full of mandates and directives about our handling of money, Still it's not really about obeying the rules.

It's about our relationship with God and life itself.

For example, I recall when I was young, my mother giving me money to go down to the end of our street to the variety store on Bloor St. to buy a loaf of bread.

When I got there I looked at all the candy, and then looked at the money in my hand. I contemplated the punished, and concluded that enjoying some candy, purchased with the money in my possession, outweighed the punishment.

BUT, I bought the bread as instructed..... because I valued the relationship more. I didn't want to deprive my family and disappoint my parents.

Stewardship is about our relationship with God and life itself.

Indeed, so if we are acting as "stewards" then we must be competent and comfortable with Giving, and this gets into the soul part.

In addition, the ease and level of giving greatly depends on what we value / what we hold dear.

We tend to hold onto things that are precious to us.

For example, I will gladly, abundantly give any of you all the snow you want. I will give you what is mine, on MY property, and you can come over and have all you want.

See how easy it is to give..... when we have extra.... or it's about something we don't cherish? Is giving surplus or what we can spare really giving?

I do think most people enjoy giving. We appreciate something about the process, including helping or delighting someone else.

To be sure, we don't particularly take pleasure in having things taken from us, and the pressure / the "obligation" to pay out / to pay a tithe or dues feels much like having something taken from us.

There are times when churches have pressured people, by persuasion or guilt, to contribute. That practice is counterproductive, even destructive because it steals the opportunity to participate in **giving**. The church gets money in the process, yet much is lost,... plus it reveals a very backwards system.

Expecting a group to "earn" a donation is missing the Deut. message and the wonder of pure giving, and it is again evidence of a backwards, counterproductive system. Yet, so many fundraiser involve just that. Maybe a bake sale is not the best way.

Sometimes churches operate as if the cart is pulling the horse.

The power of movement is in the horse, so equate that with God.

The cart is the collection of organized believers -- the church.

Sometimes, the focus, the nurture, the loyalty and the expectations are all on the cart. Decisions are made based on available resources that people have contributed, and so the vision is limited, too, because it's all up to people power.

"What can we do?" "What can we afford?" "We better fix the building first." "We better tell people we need to pay the bills." all are examples of the cart trying to pull the horse.

It's backwards.

And, keep in mind, God is a pretty smart and trustworthy horse.

God won't lead us over a cliff, and God does not call us to be stupid or destructive with the resources in our possession.

God leads the church.

God is the power,..... and we participate by giving our part.

And, this brings us back to giving.

Giving is releasing..... no strings attached.

Too often, a donation is an investment. It's an investment when a person wants to control/ influence the outcome, such as a particular activity. And, the donation is an investment if the motivation is to feel good,.. and feeling good can be expensive.

Jesus pointed this out in the Matthew text.

His advice was to donate without a show... because those public contributions were seeking to feel good by impressing others.

Jesus also noted that we should give with One hand.

I think it's harder to hold on if we are using only one hand.

A gift requires letting go

The Luke passage that's printed in your bulletin, contains Jesus' admonition to lend money to those in need, without expecting to be repaid / without getting Anything out of it.
In other words: to give / to let go.

Through the church, we are invited to give to God-- Not to the church, but to God. And, to give / to release, and not merely make an investment.

The church then has the burden and holy responsibility to "give" out those funds as God directs and leads,... and thus the outward flow continues -- the Stewardship.

I think we would encourage this process / this spiritual participation by doing our best to encourage only "Giving", and limit fundraisers to only surprises and exceptions. And, avoid making people "dance" for their donation, as if it must be earned.

Giving is a spiritual issue, and it is a critical aspect of stewardship.
It is a matter of bondage or freedom of the soul.

When things come our way, be it money, commodities or other resources,..... we have a choice on what to do with it.

We can keep it and claim it as our own or we can release it, as God directs.

Owning and holding on is based on the fear of depravity and/or greed.
The fear is that somehow the flow will stop and we'll run out.

We stock pile for when times get ugly, or when we are too weak to "earn" / "make" more.
Living in fear / living with a sense of depravity is very stressful,..very gloomy and pessimistic,..... and it is keeping God out of the picture.

Where is the hope and trust?
Will God provide or NOT?
Is what is in our possession God's or not?

Moreover, when our values are misplace, then greed is a factor.
We hold onto what we hold dear!
We hold onto what we hold dear,..... and holding on to possessions is very draining and taxing, indeed.

When I acquired horses, with help, I built fences to hold onto them.
The fences had to be strong, and frequently checked.
I often worried about them getting out, and then one day they did.
But, it wasn't because of a bad fence. I didn't properly close the gate.
All that work and worry over the fences, and it came down to a silly mistake.

There are people who worry about the stock market in the same way.
So much stress and worry about HOLDING on.

In contrast, there is the spiritual, life giving choice with what to do with what comes our way,.... and "life giving" is a good way to put it.

Instead of fearing the tap will stop flowing, we understand the source of all our possessions is God, and God is loving, generous and without end.

What comes our way is allowed to continue. There is a flow laden with a deep trust in God, and being open to this flow / participating in it is very spiritual.

By letting go, we allow, even invite more in... and thus more then goes to others, too.
And, by the way, I don't think God requires us to live hand to mouth, maybe some of us,..... I don't know.
Yet, to be sure, God cares for us too, and provides for us.

Also, it is fine to be fortunate / to be entrusted with wealth.
That would be a delightful surprise,.... and an engaging responsibility as a steward.
Some do have more than others, and...we don't judge,..... we can let go of that, too.

Do we see the spiritual element in this?
Learning to let go / to trust God with our money and possessions teaches us to let go of so many other silly and destructive things,... such as judging others.

Moreover, I don't think God expects us to empty our bank accounts and quit our jobs. All of life is receiving and giving; it's not just about money.
Yet,..... could we?

The rich man was told to sell everything he had and give it to the poor, because his stockpiling was blocking the flow, and hurting the poor. He refused to let go / refused to open up and trust God.

Being a good steward is trusting God with all things in life / with all things under our care.
And, it requires participation in the process of receiving and giving.

Of accepting,..... and letting go.

Therefore, let us confidently share in this very spiritual journey of giving.

I hope no one will donate to this church as an investment or out of guilt or **a sense of obligation.**

We do not serve the church, and our purpose is NOT to sustain Osler Mennonite Church.

Our church exists solely to serve God, to be as Christ in the world.
As a church we receive the gifts to God, and release them as leads us.

May we all be enlightened to recognize what is truly precious and what is not.
May we Hold to those "spiritual" enhancing things, and release the rest.

As it states in 1 Timothy 6:19, "...take hold of the life that really is life."

What are we holding on to,..... and why?