

Preaching Stewardship

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In April of this year, I received an invitation from Erskine Clarke to write this essay on “Preaching Stewardship.” It came to me most definitely in “the time of COVID,” but there was a sense that maybe things were getting better. For sure, most of you were not yet preaching and leading worship in embodied gatherings in your sanctuaries. If you were working in your office at the church, you were more likely than not the only person in the building. For Sundays, you were probably still pre-recording your services during the midweek or conducting worship from your living-room via Zoom. Nonetheless, at that time—a little more than a year into this frightening and deadly season that was still draping itself across our planet like a global blanket covering everything—it was possible for so many of us to sense light at the end of a tunnel. Up until late Spring, we had been living for over a year with the cumulative effect of so many deprivations and horrific scenarios piling up on top of one another. Quarantined and isolated, we had witnessed a national political meltdown, the painful demonstrations of ongoing discrimination, and violence toward people of color, the stress, the fear of getting sick (or perhaps the fact of *being* sick), the hundreds of thousands of deaths, the way in which every day felt like Groundhog Day, all of it accumulating into a feeling of lassitude. A state of mental or physical weariness, a lack of energy.

It was still the case that you could walk into a room and forget why you’d gone in there and what you were looking for. You could still experience something like the wilting of muscle memory. You could still forget the names of people, forget the places and the names of streets beyond the tiny contours plotting out the shrunken dimensions of your physical environment. You could forget at night what you were supposed to do the next day, and you could forget on that next day whatever you had done the day before. Even if you had thus far managed to avoid the illness, you still could not escape the flatness, the solitude.

Nonetheless, come Spring, some of us, at least, were beginning to feel that, maybe—just maybe—things were beginning to lighten up. There was a window when it felt that the time of COVID was beginning to wind down. So when Erskine Clarke extended his invitation to me to write a piece on Stewardship, I actually imagined pitching some ideas on stewardship to a regathered, re-embodied Church.

Then came the next wave—the Delta variant. And now, as I write these words in late August, there is at least the whiff of an emerging Lambda variant. Consequently, many churches that were beginning to cautiously regather have returned to virtual worship.

Stewardship, however, is still a relevant topic—especially in the midst of a deep sense of pessimism on the part of many pastors and other leaders serving churches across the denominational spectrum. Across recent months, I have heard from a number of them, and their predictions are dire. The Church is dying, they proclaim. Their assessment is that denominational offices and regional governing bodies are in disarray, parishioners are discouraged, the Protestant mainline is hemorrhaging

members, the youngest adults are generally disinterested, the smallest churches in the land will surely wither and die; and we will all see the carnage for ourselves when that COVID-induced global blanket covering everything is finally lifted to reveal the evidence. Indeed, the Church has suffered during this time, and there is more suffering to come. But I am persuaded that, in the final analysis, the ultimate life of the Church is not up to these prematurely-certain prognosticators; it is, thankfully, up to Someone higher up the chain of command.

When I now preach or teach in congregations or presbyteries—still almost always virtually in these days—someone often asks me a worried question: “Do you think the Church will survive?” The question is a COVID question, and the questioner is deeply discouraged. Many of us, perhaps, in some secret recess of the heart, are occasionally entertaining that question. “Do you think the Church will survive?” “Of course I do,” I answer, “because I believe that Jesus Christ still loves the Church!” Occasionally the follow-up question comes back immediately: “What’s your evidence that that is so?” And I respond: “Jesus took perhaps his most neurotic, dunderheaded disciple—the one who was often popping off and rarely got anything right—and said to him, ‘You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church.’ And I don’t believe that, in this COVID season, Jesus has somehow changed his mind.” This conviction, by the way, is at the heart of my impatience with self-appointed prognosticators of doom with respect to their cynicism regarding the ongoing existence of the Church.

Nonetheless, we will need to think boldly about Stewardship in this time. We would be wise to couch our approach to Stewardship in the context of Jesus’ deep and abiding commitment to the life of the Church and his presence within the Church’s life, whatever frightening times we happen to be living through. Further, we should start our thoughts about any Stewardship season not with small tweaks and gimmicks, but with the stout claims of God’s ongoing presence in the midst of the people of God.

In my judgment, one of the great stewardship texts is from the book of Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy 14:1, the Israelites are described as not just any nation, but “children of the Lord your God.”¹ This description underlined the close and unbreakable relationship that linked Israel to Israel’s God. It was a relationship of holiness, as asserted in verse 2: “For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; it is you the Lord has chosen out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession.”² As God’s people, all of Israel’s life, as one scholar put it, “was set under a great umbrella of the sacred and this protecting shelter kept in proper repair because God’s name was attached to it.”³ In this context, bringing the tithe to the Temple was a matter of giving back to God in a relationship of holiness, grounded in the grateful notion that all of life belongs to God. It was a recognition of God’s endless and deep generosity.

This Deuteronomic understanding of stewardship is mirrored many places throughout scripture, and certainly in the New Testament. One of my favorite New Testament texts—great food for thought when it comes to Stewardship—begins in First Corinthians 3:21: “So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God. Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries.”⁴ It is important to note that the minister’s work is defined with respect not to herself, but

rather with respect to someone else—Christ and God. Ministers, at their best, are not their own. They serve instead on behalf of Christ, to whom they belong. They unfold mysteries of their faith that derive from God, not from themselves.

Another New Testament text which addresses the largeness and profundity of Stewardship is found in Hebrews 13: “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” The text goes on to describe the great range of stewardship: remembering those in prison, “as though you were in prison with them”; remembering those being tortured, “as though you yourselves were being tortured.” Holding in honor the sacredness of marriage, keeping your lives free from “the love of money,” being content with what you have, remembering your leaders, staying clear from all manner of strange teachings, maintaining a clear conscience, acting honorably in all things, remembering to do good and share what you have.⁵ This is a comprehensive picture of how Stewardship is not just a season or a fund-raising program. Stewardship is an ethic as comprehensive as one’s whole life.

In my role as a seminary president, I get to glimpse in our students the future of the Church’s life on a regular basis. I get to witness students at every Commencement event each Spring, and watch them—having been through three or four years of the furnace that seminaries can often be—watch them preparing to head out into the fields of harvest, committed to becoming servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God!

This past spring, I pondered the faces of our latest pack of graduates as they populated our sacred space on Commencement Sunday. It wasn’t the sanctuary space in which we have been hosted in more normal years. It was the sacred space created by technology—the screens across which the faces of our latest graduating class had gathered. And in that moment, for some reason mysterious to me, I recalled something David Brooks had written about how this time of COVID has created not just a social problem, but a moral problem. “We say we feel a sense of purpose and mission when we are serving a cause larger than ourselves. But I’ve learned this year,” he said, “how much having a feeling of purpose depends upon the small acts of hospitality we give and receive each day, sometimes with people we don’t know all that well.”⁶ Those students across that screen on that day had, no doubt, great aspirations for what is next for them. But my prayer for them, and for us, is that we cultivate—as stewards of God’s mysteries—both the comprehensiveness of giving yourself away, and the habit of small, daily acts of hospitality for people whom we sometimes don’t even know.

In my role as an active participant in the life of a particular congregation in Austin, I cannot wait to return to my particular pew when it is safe for us to gather, embodied, again. One thing I am sure I will feel will be the gratitude that that church is still here, that we are still here, that our mission in the world around and beyond us—and within often small, daily acts of hospitality—is still here; and thus the power of Stewardship flowing out of the sense that, thank God, we, all of us, are still here!

Of course, as so many people are fond of saying, “some things are going to be different...don’t think it’s going to be the same old same-old.” Yes, for sure, some things are going to be different. But, even in its difference, the Church still belongs to God. We are entrusted, therefore, with an eternal gift—the God who, in every age, still gives us the Church!

And, sure, it will be different. But the great mythic cycles of the Christian faith throughout the Christian year—the repetitive gifts that run, over and over again, from Incarnation to Resurrection—will still be the same cycles. Within those cycles are embodied the need to pray, the need to raise our voices in song and speech, the need to see again those fellow parishioners with whom we are embodied, the need to stand up in a pulpit and proclaim, the need to stand at Table and then go forward empowered by the Body and the Blood of Christ until we become sacraments ourselves of God’s stubborn presence in a fallen and needy world. We will be grateful for all of it! We will be grateful for what will be different as well as what is the same. All of it will be the ongoing gift of God, who is forever—even in this disruptive season—giving the Church to the Church, becoming, yet again, servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God; and being, often, the vessels who bear small acts of hospitality for people who sometimes we don’t even know.

I remember a summer day back in the late summer of 2019, long before we had ever heard the word *COVID*. On that day, here in Austin, I gathered up my birth certificate and my social security information and all the other necessary documentation, and I headed off to that cathedral of broken promises—the Division of Motor Vehicles building. It was a drab green government building on an unremarkable industrial boulevard in north Austin.

I got there at 10:00 sharp, and there were several hundred people standing in various lines or sitting in rows of seats. They looked a bit like cattle being processed. A small, unhappy-looking collection of uniformed employees barked at people who were not moving fast enough, and occasionally threatened to usher some people out into the Texas sun to do their waiting there. When I finally got to my first stop in this maze of broken bureaucracy, the man behind the counter wore a smile on his face that telegraphed: “Don’t read too much into this smile; I’m really not happy to see you.” He inspected my forms, typed me into the system, and handed me a ticket that said “S-2014.” I asked him, “How long will this take?” “Couple of hours,” he muttered. I took a seat in a row of metal chairs. “What’s your ticket number?” I said to the young woman sitting on my left. “S-1058,” she said. She was more than 950 spots ahead of me. I settled into my chair and pulled out my cellphone to read the news. Over time, I noticed this obnoxious loudspeaker blaring the progress we were all making. A computer voice would say, every few seconds, “Now handling ticket number S-1001 at Station Number Five.” “Now handling ticket number A-2001 at Station Number Twelve.” “Now handling ticket number W-5892 at Station Number Sixteen.”

The hipster to my right finally turned to me and said, “Dude, Hell is a lot better than this!” I thought about that claim, and finally agreed with him. He said, “Think about it, Dude! In Hell,” he said, “at least you probably have Black Sabbath packing out one arena and killing it with their song ‘War Pigs,’ and then, on another stage, Slayer or Metallica...and then all the bars, Man! Hell is a lot better than this!”

Eventually, the woman to my left got called up, and her seat was quickly occupied by a spry 95-year-old man who was there to sign over his car to his grandson. He started a long soliloquy about his service in World War 2—a gravelly narrative that didn’t seem to have any punctuation. “I just moved here from South Carolina to be with my daughter and her family in the war I served in the Navy under a lieutenant Commander named Richard Milhous Nixon don’t suppose you ever heard of him.” We got to talking, and every once in a while the ongoing countdown blared loudly,

“Now handling ticket number S-1170 at Station Number Sixteen.”

It had now been more than two hours, so I went back to the man behind the counter with the phony smile. “The system’s acting up; it’s probably a couple more hours,” he mumbled. Another hour in, the speaker blared: “Now handling ticket number S-2013.” “Yessss!” I said, and I high-fived my 95-year-old Navy friend. The speaker blared again. “Now handling ticket number S-2015. Now handling ticket number S-2016.” I went back to the man with the phony smile. “Sir, they just called out the ticket right before mine, and then they called out the ticket right after mine, but they neglected to call out my ticket. What’s going on?” “Oh, this happens sometimes, go back and sit down.”

I sank into my chair and closed my eyes. Finally the Navy veteran poked me in the ribs: “Kid, they just called your number!” “No, they didn’t,” I said in despair. “Don’t be an idiot, Kid, go to Station Number Twelve right now!”

The dear lady at Station Number 12 smiled broadly. “Welcome, Sweetie, let me see your driver’s license.” I was sputtering about the incompetence and the fact that it was now almost 4:00 p.m. “They do this all the time,” she said. “They’re bad. I’m going to help you.”

She looked at me. “Are you a lawyer?” she said. “No ma’am.” “Well you look like a lawyer. What do you do?” “I’m the president of a seminary.” She lit up and said, “Oh, really, which one?” My confidence was immediately restored, and I held my head up and said, “I’m the president of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary.” She said, “I’ve never heard of that cemetery.” I said, “No ma’am, it’s not a cemetery; it’s a seminary.” “Well, what’s a seminary?” she asked. I told her, and she said, “You prepare people to be priests?” I thought for a second about correcting her terminology, but finally just said, “Yes ma’am.” She said, “I had a priest in here two weeks ago; a very sweet man. He serves up at St. Margaret and St. Mary, a great church. He’s the real deal. If you train people like that, you’ve got a great job.”

She said, “Stand up and look at this camera...[click]...Ah, that’s a nice shot. Here you go, Father. Look at the information and make sure it’s right. And Father, have a blessed day!” She smiled. It wasn’t a phony smile.

“Think of us in this way,” wrote St. Paul: “as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries.”

Notes

1 Deuteronomy 14:1.

2 Deuteronomy 14:2.

3 Ronald E. Clements, “Deuteronomy,” *The New Interpreters’ Bible*, vol. ii (Abingdon Press, 1998), 397.

4 First Corinthians 3:21-4:1.

5 Hebrews 13:1-16 NRSV

6 David Brooks, “How COVID Can Change Your Personality,” *The New York Times*, April 1, 2021.