

AFTER WE SAY WE BELIEVE

Trustees in God's kingdom: A shared trust
1 Corinthians 12:12-17, 24b-27; Mark 12:28-34

I often begin my annual stewardship sermons
with something semi-apologetic and semi-humorous.
To lighten the mood,
to sort of ease you into the dreaded money-talk.

Not this year.
Because I am in no way apologetic,
and in no way hesitant,
to preach not just *one*, but *two* sermons on stewardship.
My only apology
is to say I'm sorry if I ever preached a sermon, any Sunday,
that was not, at its core, a stewardship sermon.

We think far too small about stewardship.
Theologian Douglas John Hall once said,
"Stewardship is all that I do after I say, 'I believe.'"
I couldn't agree more.

When we make a genuine statement of belief, of faith, of trust in God,
it reorients everything.
Forget the silly notion that stewardship
is deciding how much money to give the church.
Stewardship is everything we do, after we say we believe.

If we believe that God is
creator and owner of all that exists in the universe;
If we believe that
God has entrusted us with the responsibility to care for all of it
in a way that honors the owner;
then welcome to your full-time job,
a job for which you're not just on-call, but on-duty 24/7.
Job title? "God's Trustee."

I use the word Trustee instead of Steward.
Same thing.
But "trustee" is more familiar,

and it explicitly names the essential truth on this subject—
This is all about trust.

We all know we need to have faith in *God*.
We need to trust God.
But the most astounding truth about life as a servant of God,
is that God has faith in *us*.
God trusts us.

If we don't understand that,
we don't understand the core message of scripture.

Since God wants a relationship with us based on mutual love,
God gave us freedom to choose whether to *be* in that relationship.
The consequence of giving us freedom
is that humankind often chose against God,
to our detriment, and the detriment of the world.

But God is still determined to bring us, and everything else,
back to our created purpose.
God is determined to save, to redeem, to restore.
But God needs us, as trusted partners in this work.
Because if God put things right unilaterally,
with a divine flick of the wrist,
God would have destroyed human freedom,
the very thing necessary for a love relationship.
So God called out a people, put his complete trust in that people.
God made them partners in mission.

Saving, redeeming, restoring, and reconciling is God's mission.
And we are God's trustees.

The definition of a trustee is simple.
A trustee is someone who is given trust,
by the owner of whatever is being entrusted.

So for instance, when a young child inherits a large sum of money,
it's put into a trust fund,
managed by a trustee.
Someone who can be trusted, more than an 8-year-old,

to manage large sums of money.

And when a church appoints trustees
to look after the building and grounds,
they choose someone they trust
to take care of the property the church owns.

But one important thing about being God's trustee,
it's not a solo job.
It's not a sole trusteeship.
We are a board of trustees.

Most universities have a board of trustees.
The trustees don't own the university.
Maybe the state government owns it,
or a church owns it.
And the board of trustees
carry out the mission and vision of the owners.
Trustees don't make up their own mission,
they are in service to the mission of the owners.

But just as significantly,
they function together as a board, not individually.
When the board is not in session,
they are ordinary citizens.
Individuals are not authorized to speak on behalf of the board.
They are part of a joint trusteeship.
It needs to be this way
because the organization needs the wisdom of a community.
It's not always clear
how the vision and mission of the owner
gets interpreted and applied in various circumstances—
such as how to prioritize the annual budget,
and whether to fund this building, or that program,
or change this policy, or that curriculum.
So the Trustees act as a community of interpreters,
trying to meet a changing set of needs and circumstances,
in a way that remains faithful to the owner's vision and mission.

That's why it's healthier to have a board of trustees

with a wide range of perspectives,
with a variety of gifts and strengths and expertise,
who approach problems from different angles.
When they can work together as a body,
unified in purpose and mission,
and diverse in gifts and perspectives,
they are more likely to stay faithful to the owner.

We—those of us who say “we believe”—
are God's board of trustees.

We who acknowledge that God is Sovereign over all creation,
and who submit our lives to the reign of God in Jesus Christ,
have, by definition, accepted a communal responsibility,
to act on God's behalf in this world,
serving the mission and purposes of God.

We are the body of Christ,
not in some mystical and metaphorical sense,
but literally, physically.
Together, we embody Christ in the world,
acting on God's behalf, as God's trustees.

And God has seen fit to give this body a variety of gifts.
And has blessed the members of this body
with a variety of perspectives,
and personality characteristics,
and ways of thinking and solving problems.
So that working together,
with God's saving and reconciling mission at the center,
we have what it takes to be good trustees,
faithful to the trust God has placed in us as a body.

That, I believe, is precisely the message brought home
by today's epistle reading from 1 Corinthians.
“The body is one,” the apostle Paul writes,
“and it has many members.”
We need each other.
“If the foot would say, ‘Because I am not a hand,
I do not belong to the body,’

that would not make it any less a part of the body.
If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be . . . ?
The head cannot say to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’”
But God arranged the body,
and God intends the body to work together
with a unified purpose.
That is the body to whom God had entrusted
his mission and purpose for all creation.

We don’t really have a big issue with this.
Yes, we’re one body with interdependent members.
We can live with that, in the abstract.
But when it starts getting personal,
our enthusiasm diminishes.
We get a little edgy about this notion
that we all share some responsibility for each other, mutually,
in terms of how we’re doing as God’s steward,
God’s trustee.

Some of the boards I’ve served on have done peer reviews,
where the board members evaluate each other
on their performance as a board member.

But in the church,
we don’t really want other trustees looking over our shoulder,
giving us specific counsel.
This is true in any area of our lives—
vocational issues,
relationship issues,
personal morality.
But it’s certainly all hands off
when it comes to money and possessions.
That’s private.
That’s just between me and God, thank you very much.

And suddenly we opt off the board.
We act outside the authority of God’s board of trustees.
I think our deep commitment to privacy
when it comes to how we use God’s money and God’s possessions

comes directly from our culture of individualism.
It doesn’t come from the Bible.

Some of you might be thinking,
“Oh, but didn’t Jesus teach that when we give money
we shouldn’t let our left hand know what our right hand is doing?”
Actually, no. He did not.

Jesus *did* say that when we give money to poor people,
we shouldn’t go out in the street and make a big show of it,
so as to impress other people about how kind we are.

But in the Bible, people’s contributions to their faith community
were nearly *always* a public matter.
People were held accountable.
Jesus himself, one day,
sat down with his disciples
directly opposite the temple treasury deposit box,
and not only watched what people dropped in,
but pointed it out to bystanders,
and made comments about it.
Did you see what those rich people put in?
Did you see what that poor widow put in?

Members of the early church, Ananias and Sapphira,
were publicly called out, and punished by God,
for their selfishness and deceit,
in the way they used their finances for God’s kingdom.

And when Paul wanted other churches to contribute
to the needy Christians in Jerusalem,
he played one church off another,
the Macedonians off the Corinthians.
He encouraged generosity
by publicly pointing out the generosity of others.

Interesting, isn’t it, how we’ve come to where we are.
That in terms of how we save, spend, or give away
God’s money and God’s possessions,

privacy is a sacred cow.

Now I wouldn't suggest the *only* way for me to be faithful is to invite my church friends over to my house, gather around my computer, and open up Quicken and TurboTax, and say, "So, tell me what you think.

Am I being faithful with God's money?"

No, it's not the *only* way to be faithful.

But I think it's one legitimate way.

I at least ought to consider, with some careful and honest prayer,

"How can I open up my decisions about how I manage my finances, and how I invest in the work of God's kingdom?

How can I let those decisions actually be shaped by the fact

that I am a part of the body of Christ,

that I have a role as a member of the board of God's trustees?"

I think that question is especially crucial right now,

in a time a great economic distress and uncertainty.

If we're not careful,

suddenly all our financial decisions,

including our investments in God's kingdom,

are being determined by a very earthy, primal, and reactive fear.

Suddenly, protecting the quantity of grain in our private storehouses is concern #1.

Everything else is secondary.

It is times of crisis like this that reveal

the naked truth about ourselves.

Suddenly it becomes clear if our hope and peace,

and joyful anticipation of the future,

is rooted in our trust of God and God's kingdom,

or in the state of the U.S. and global economy.

Suddenly we find out whether our commitment

to worship God with our First-fruits,

to give God the first of our harvest,

and not the leftovers,

is just lip service,

or a genuine life-shaping commitment.

And I'm *not* just talking about the way we choose to fill out the Faith Promise cards for giving to Park View Mennonite Church next year.

That's *part* of it, sure. But just *one* part.

It's about how freely and joyfully we materially invest in God's mission of redeeming and reconciling creation.

Not just with our charitable giving,

but with *all* of God's money

that we're temporarily managing for God.

It's about how we care for the least of these among us,

the faces of Jesus in the poor and hungry and homeless.

Isn't it curious, that when the economy goes south,

many service organizations

start running out of money to care for the most vulnerable?

I'd *like* to say that the drop in giving

comes only from those without a faith orientation.

I'd *like* to say that everyone who puts hope in God's kingdom,

and who worships a generous God,

keeps up, and even increases, their own generosity.

But I might be on shaky ground.

I wonder what it would be like,

if in times of economic uncertainty,

the automatic response of Christians

would be to turn to each other for support,

for counsel, for spiritual reorientation.

If instead of letting our decisions be governed

by our very real and substantial fears about the future,

we intentionally turned to the community of God's trustees, to get reoriented.

If instead of circling the wagons, taking a protective stance,

and getting even more private about our money,

we invited a few of our sisters and brothers in the church

to meet together for a time of worship and prayer and Bible study,

that focused on our hope in God's kingdom,

and our experience of God's abundance and generosity.

What if we intentionally took steps to orient ourselves
not around our fears and worries,
but around the source of our hope and joy,
to orient ourselves around the God of abundance and generosity.

And then from *that* position of re-orientation,
we sought counsel from others of God's trustees,
on how God might want us
to spend, save, or give away God's money,
and God's other material assets
that we are privileged to manage for God?
And this mutual counsel could *include*, as one part of it,
how we fill out our 2009 Faith Promises.

Radical way of thinking?
Maybe, for our *culture*.
But not for biblical people, I would think.
Not for people who think Jesus meant what he said
when he spoke in ways that were upside down
to our culturally-conditioned ways of thinking.

Such as blessed are the poor,
and blessed are those who mourn,
and blessed are the lowly.
In the Beatitudes, the word blessed means "supremely happy."
The poor, the mourning, and others in a lowly state,
can be happy for the simple reason
that they have been reoriented.
They judge their state of affairs by the values of God's kingdom.
In the midst of trying circumstances,
they can genuinely rejoice and be glad,
for theirs is the kingdom of God.

Can *we* find reason to rejoice?

—Philip L. Kniss, November 16, 2008