

“FOUR LETTER WORDS OF STEWARDSHIP:
I – ONLY OR GIFT”

Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
November 3, 2013
All Saints’ Sunday

I Corinthians 12:1-11

Today, we begin one of my favorite seasons in the church year – stewardship season – the time of year when we focus on the stewardship of all that God has given each of us – time, talents and treasure. I’m not sure how many pastors would stand up here and say it was their favorite time of year – as a matter of fact, I know a lot of pastors who really don’t like it. They think it’s all about money, and they’re uncomfortable talking about money.

But it’s not just all about money – it’s about how we look at everything that we have received from God, and how we in turn, use those things to His glory.

I’ll never forget a story I read from the great preacher and professor Fred Craddock. Some of you may have heard it before. It was actually a story about his father. Fred grew up in what he says was a typical home in his day – a father, a mother and several children. Every Sunday, their mother would take the kids to Sunday School and church, and every Sunday, their father would stay home. He

didn't have much use for the church or religion, and he was irritated that going to church meant dinner would be on the table later than usual.

Fred's father thought that all the church cared about was numbers – another member here, another member there, a dollar here, a dollar there – it was just all about numbers. Whenever anybody talked about church, that was his reply: “another number, another dollar – the church doesn't care about me.”

That's how it was pretty much all of Fred's life. Then, his father grew old, and got sick – really, really sick. He was in a veteran's hospital, and couldn't speak because the illness from which he was suffering and the treatment for it had taken their toll. He couldn't even eat. He was extremely weak.

Fred says when he came to town to see him, and he entered his hospital room, there were plants and flowers all around the room, and a stack of cards several inches deep on his bedside table. And as he looked more closely at it all – the flowers, the plants, and the cards – he realized they were all from the church.

As Fred looked at all of those things, and as he was reading from one of the cards, his father saw him. Since he could not speak, he picked up a Kleenex box

and a pen, and wrote on the side of the box a line from Shakespeare, which goes like this: “In this harsh world draw your breath in pain to tell my story.”

After Fred looked at what he wrote, he looked into his father’s eyes and said, “What is your story, Daddy?”

His father wrote, “I was wrong.”

(Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, p. 14)

It took a lot for that man to realize what church and faith are all about – it’s not about another number, another dollar – it’s about giving out of love, giving from the abundance of all that God has given you – it’s about giving.

Sadly, far too often, before we offer our gifts, the word “only” rears its ugly head. “I can’t give to that, I’ve only got enough for me,” or “I can’t lead a group, I’m only a follower,” or “I can’t sing in the choir, or attend a Sunday School class, or go on a mission trip – I’ve only got so much time and can’t do it.” Far too often, we put limits on our giving – of our time, talents and treasures – instead of freely offering our gifts in the service of God and others.

And it's not just because we want to be in control, sometimes we say "only" because we fail to see, or just don't appreciate or acknowledge the gifts we do have. I've sat next to more than one person who claims they can't sing, when I know good and well, because I hear them – that they can! And far too many people look at their own gifts in terms of how they compare to others – so no wonder they use the word only.

If I compared myself to Pavarotti or even Katy Perry, of course, I would think I couldn't sing – but I don't have to compare myself to them – I am who I am, and I have the kind of gift of music God wanted me to have – and so I use what I have to His glory.

That's what stewardship is all about, friends. Using what God has given you, and giving of what He has given you, as best you can, to His honor and glory.

Today, we're remembering and honoring the lives of people we have loved who died this past year. When I looked over the list of members who had died, and thought of so many others who passed away as well, I saw so many who gave so fully of the gifts God had given them. And they did it in so many wonderful ways!

Some did it through teaching – encouraging young people to be all that they could be. Some did it through humor, making people laugh. Others did it with their special way of loving a parent, or grandchildren, or even people with special needs. Others did it by offering their lives in public service. Some used their gifts in the kitchen to bring joy to those they loved. Some helped run mission projects, and some ran their own businesses. But all of them, in one way or another, gave of themselves – and they touched our lives in a special way because of it.

Their deaths have touched us as well. We mourn their passing, we miss them so dearly, our world is not the same without them. But oh how glad we are they lived life fully and faithfully, giving of themselves for as long as they could.

And oh how glad we are that when they drew their last breath God welcomed them all home to a place prepared just for them by Jesus Himself. And, as we look at the names and faces of those who have died, it is not hard for us to imagine that, when they passed into the gates of heaven, the Lord Himself welcomed them home, saying, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Thank you for using your gifts so well. Well done.”

May their lives be examples for all of us. May we, like them, always offer all that we are, and all that we have, to God, who first gave it all for us.

Let us remember now the saints of this church who have left us this past year.