

“FOUR LETTER WORDS OF STEWARDSHIP:
II – MINE OR GOD’S?”
Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
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Psalm 24

John 21:1-14

I begin this morning with a question – particularly to all of you who are parents. How old do you think it is when kids start to feel possessive about their things? You know, when they cling on to a favorite toy when some other child wants to play with it, screaming, “No, it’s mine!” What, maybe two or three?

I’ve done my share of babysitting over the years – I started babysitting at the age of 11 (not to mention the fact that I did a lot of babysitting for my younger brothers, who were real brats, at times!) And I remember that, on many an occasion, there would be a screaming match, a pushing and pulling, a nearly tearing apart of the beloved toy, because that child didn’t want to share what clearly belonged to him or her. “No, it’s mine!”

Somehow, we adopt that kind of thinking early in life, and sadly, it seems to just get stronger the older we get. We all like our own toys, if you will. You’ve probably seen that old bumper sticker that said, “The one with the most toys wins!”

Sadly, all of us have grown up in a world that pretty much encourages us to possess things, and the more the merrier. And the problem is that the more we possess, the more we have that mentality that “it’s ours.” And to some degree, it is. We work hard, we get paid, we buy things, and in one sense, they are ours.

But in the larger sense, they aren’t. Let me explain. Take, for instance, your home and the land on which it sits. Now, in one sense, it’s yours. You worked hard to earn money to buy it, you paid for it or you’re paying for it, so in the eyes of the world and the way it works, you own it – it’s yours.

On the other hand, do you really own it? Is it really yours? I’ll tell you how you know. Did someone else live there once, and will someone live there after you? Most assuredly. Can you take it with you when you die? Most assuredly not.

Years ago, when the great John D. Rockefeller passed away (by the way, if you don’t know who John D. Rockefeller is – he was the Bill Gates of his time). Anyway, when Rockefeller passed away, someone asked the question, “How much of his money did he leave behind?” The answer, “All of it.” You can’t take it with you!

Even though in the eyes of the world, we own things, in reality, we are only the temporary stewards of those things. They don’t ever really belong to us – in fact, they belong to God. We read that in the psalm this morning – “The earth is the

Lord's and all that is in it; the world, and those who live in it." (Ps. 24:1) The things we have are gifts in each of our lives from God. Everything that we have, everything we think we own, actually are gifts from God, for us to use as best we can. Sure, we acquire most of those things because we work for them, but who gave us the abilities that we have for the work that we do?

So why does all that matter? Why does it matter how we look at the things, the possessions, the money in all our lives? It matters because it affects what we then do with those things – how we use them, how we share them, and how we value them.

Bishop Robert Schnase wrote about this in his book *Five Practices of Fruitful Living*. In it, he said this:

"Fundamentally, we either consider the material things in our life – our money, house, property, as owned by God and belonging to God, and we manage them for God's purpose; or we view them as owned by us. If they are owned by God, then our tithes and offerings represent our returning to God what belongs to God already. What we keep also belongs to God, and we feel obligated to spend it wisely and not frivolously, and to invest it in ways that do not dishonor God's purposes. We try not to waste money or to live more lavishly than we should. We spend responsibly, allowing our relationship with God to form our minds. We manage God's resources as faithfully as we can."

"But," (he continues), if we believe that our material resources fundamentally belong to us and that we entirely possess them ourselves, then we can do whatever we please with what we own, and our tithes and offerings are giving something that belongs to us, to God. God should be grateful for our generosity in giving a percentage for God's purpose, rather than our feeling grateful for the privilege of using what belongs to God." (Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Living*, p. 125)

Boy, he hits the nail right on the head! How you think about the things you have – whether you believe that are yours or God's – will make all the difference in the world in how you use those things, share those things, and for our purposes here in the church, make your offering.

Of all people in the world, we who claim the name Christian, who worship God – the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – we should be those who have the proper perspective about possessions. Because we've staked our very lives on the great Giver of life – God Himself, who since time began, has given and given and given to us – from the gifts in the garden to Adam and Eve; to manna in the wilderness to the chosen people who were wandering; to leaders who would make of them a nation; to the greatest gift of all, Jesus Christ, who came to set us free. Since time began, God has blessed humanity, and even now, He is blessing each of us with blessings too numerous to mention. It's **not** all ours, it's God's.

My friends, once we make that fundamental shift in our thinking, we are changed in a number of ways. For one, we become ever so much more grateful. We become grateful for all of the things in our lives – people, work, home, the opportunities we have for leisure and enjoyment, for travel. We just become more grateful for everything we have in our lives. We don't take anything for granted.

We're grateful to walk through a door into our warm house, or to put on a warm coat to go back outside. We're grateful that we have a job to go to, and friends with whom to spend time. We're grateful for time off and vacations. We're grateful for beautiful leaves and awesome sunsets, and for standing on sidelines cheering on little soccer players and big football ones!

You see, when we see all that we have are gifts from God, we become ever so grateful. We see the world with new eyes – grateful eyes.

Then, having seen, secondly, we become generous people. When we see everything that we have as a gift from God, when we know that we have, only because God has given, we want to share with others as He has shared with us! I want to tell you from my personal experience in ministry for 27 years, that the most generous givers are the ones who are most grateful to God for the gifts He has given them. And let me add something – that doesn't mean they're the most wealthy. It means that no matter what the value of the things they possess, they know from where it all comes – it comes from God – and so they want to give just as God gave.

Surely you remember hearing the story of a woman who worked as a custodian at a college for years and years and years, who, when she died, ended up leaving a fortune to that same college. She lived within her means her entire life, she saw everything that she had as a blessing from God, and in the end, she generously blessed others just as God had blessed her.

People who see all that they have as gifts from God are grateful, they're generous, and thirdly, they're excited by what they can do with what they have been given. They're excited, because they can see the possibilities of great things happening if they just share from what they have.

I want to tell you folks, that if you can't get excited about what you can do around here with the gifts God has given you, then something's wrong. Just look around and see everything that goes on because of your giving.

Someone came here today with a broken heart, and someone greeted them with a smile as they came in (no, make them several someones). They've heard music that eased their pain, a Word from the Lord that reminded them of His presence with them always. They're surrounded by loving people, and will have a chance to share a cup of coffee and goodie before they leave. That may not seem like much to you, but to that person, it saved them on this day. And it's happening because you have given to the church from the gifts God has given you.

Down in Weldin Hall, little children are being called to the front of the room for “the Children’s Time” at “The Gathering” worship service – and they feel oh, so special, because someone’s reading a book just for them, and they know how much they matter. And that’s happening – that service is happening, that moment is happening - because you have given to the church from the gifts God has given you.

Up in Boston and down in Washington, two wonderful young people from this church are in seminary, training to be the future leaders we so dearly need. They’re pursuing with passion the call of God on their lives, and they can only do that because of the gifts we as a church have given to them and their seminaries for scholarship money.

On any given night of the week, people gather in rooms all over the church – for Bible studies, or choir rehearsals, or youth group, or circle meetings, or men’s meetings, or committee meetings – to come to know Jesus, to do ministry in His name, to draw others into His love. They can do that, because your gifts help to pay for the utilities and staff to make them happen.

At Thomson Estates Elementary School, hundreds of children now have access to classroom libraries – children, who in large part, come from homes that are struggling. They are thrilled, they’ve written us such wonderful thank you letters, they’ve begun to love reading, and they know that someone cares for them besides the people at their school. You’ve made that happen through your giving!

I could go on and on, but I want to add just one more – the college care packages that we send. You may not think that’s such a big deal – but I want to tell you, that if I had received care packages from my church when I was in college, it would have been a life-saver. I’ve told you before what a horrible case of homesickness I had. Just one package from my home church would have reminded me that I wasn’t alone, that I was loved and cared for and missed. I never got one of those, but our students get several of them a year. We’ve gotten so many wonderful thank you notes from them – those packages mean the world to them – and they are sent and received because of your generosity.

Oh friends, it is so exciting to see what God can do when we give generously from the gifts He has given us!

I want to close with a story and a challenge. One winter, a group of clergy friends decided to go skiing for a few days in the mountains of Colorado. They stayed in a great cabin at the base of one of the mountains, though it wasn’t near one of the ski lifts – they had to drive to get to one of those. But, one morning they got up, and were sitting around having coffee, when one of the pastors looked out the window up the mountain and said to the others, “Hey guys, let’s take our skis and hike up this mountain. The snow is virgin powder. No one has skied on it before. It won’t be easy, but imagine the experience when we ski down!”

Several of them chimed in and said, “Okay, let’s do it!” but a couple of others pooh-poohed the idea. “You guys are nuts! Who in their right mind carries skis and boots halfway up a mountain for just a few minutes of pleasure as you ski down? No thanks! We’re going to stay right here by the fire and enjoy our coffee – you go right ahead and ski.”

Which is exactly what the others did. These two pastors sat by a roaring fire drinking hot coffee and watching their friends slowly trudge their way up the mountain for thirty minutes. Then they watched as their friends put on their skis and turned and began skiing down on this snow no one had touched. It didn’t take very long for them to get to the bottom, and then come back to the cabin. They stood outside and took off their skis and laid down their equipment, then they came back inside talking a mile a minute – laughing and all talking at once about how great it was!

And all these two guys could do was sit and listen. Finally, one of the skiers turned to them and said, “You guys just missed the very best part of our entire vacation!” (Adam Hamilton, *Unleashing the Word*, p. 106)

The one who told their story, Adam Hamilton, went on to say this about it: that there have been times in the life of the church he serves where people were reluctant to give towards a project or ministry. They chose, as it were, to instead sit by the fire and just watch – they didn’t give as they could have. And Hamilton says, they missed the best part of the journey!

My friends, don’t miss the best part of the journey. There are so many good things that God is bringing about through the ministry of this church. It so reminds me of the abundance of fish that the disciples brought up out of the water after Jesus told them what to do. Before, on their own, they got nothing – with Jesus, their nets filled to overflowing. In the same way, our nets here at Elkton UMC are filled to overflowing with wonderful things that God is enabling us to do. Lives are being touched, hearts are being changed, needs are being met, love is being shared – and it’s all happening because you are giving of the things that God has given you.

Friends, don’t miss the best part of the journey. As you pray this week about the pledge you will make next week for the ministries of our church in 2014, remember that you are a partner with God in this amazing journey of life. Just imagine what you can do when you give freely and generously with what you have been given by God!

Amen.