

Church of the Crossroads
Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time
November 12, 2006
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THE STEWARDSHIP OF LIFE

1 Kings 17:8-16
Psalm 146
Mark 12:39-44

In his still-timely book *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age*, Douglas John Hall reminds us that the task of Christian theology is to interpret the world in which we live through the lens of the scriptures that are so central to our life and faith as Christians. This requires, as Karl Barth once said, that we go through life with the Bible in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other.

The task is twofold. First, we must discover those truths in the scriptures that will have meaning for us in our particular time and place. This may mean that we will find ourselves recovering a biblical image or theme that has been lost to us for any number of reasons.

The Biblical image of the steward is one such image that we have begun to recover in our time. During the centuries of Christendom this image was neglected or deemed as having little significance. But in our time, given the environmental and economic crises which we face, this image of the steward has begun to re-emerge, not only in Christian communities, but in environmental circles as well.

When I think back to my own early experience in the Christian community, stewardship was largely limited to the giving of money to the church. When stewardship time came around, we all knew what was coming. We knew that the inevitable appeal for money would be made, and then we could forget about stewardship for a whole year.

Stewardship in our day has begun to take on a much larger significance, although it still does involve the invitation to give of our financial resources for the ministry and mission of the church. But we now

place that need within a much larger context, the need for us to be *stewards of the whole of life*. Hence the title of this sermon: *The Stewardship of Life*.

If the first task of Christian theology is to explore the scriptures for truths that may help us in our journey of faith, the second task is to discern the time in which we live. The image of the steward and the theme of stewardship may be well and good, but how, exactly, do they relate to the world in which we live? This goes to the heart of the theological task which is not only to discover biblical images and themes that may be important for us, but also to discern the spirit of the age in which we live. What *is* the spirit of the age in which we live, or as theologians would say, what is the *Zeitgeist* of our time?

It may seem to be an impossible task for us to say anything about the spirit of the age in which we live. Most often, we like to consider such a subject in retrospect. It is easier for us to talk of the spirit of the nineteenth century than it is for us to discover the spirit of the early twenty-first. And yet, we must attempt to do so if we are to live into the future with a measure of direction and purpose.

Again, in his little book, *The Steward*, Douglas John Hall helps us to engage in this task of discerning the spirit of our time. He does so, as is often his custom, by setting up a dialectic, or dialogue, between two contrasting themes that seem to describe our human experience in this world of ours. On the one hand, Douglas Hall says, we have been and are still enamored with the whole idea of human mastery. The technological revolution of our day has been guided by this notion of human mastery. Through technology, we seek to gain control over life. Technology, in itself, is not necessarily bad. Few of us would want to return to a time devoid of appliances or computers. The products of technology are not the problem. The problem is the mindset that says that we can solve all of our problems through technological advances. Through technology, we have been told, we can master the universe.

This notion of mastery is beginning to backfire on us. For, all of a sudden, we have discovered that in spite of all the technology at our disposal, the world has not improved. We are still subject to the old problems, now heightened: the problem of war, the new reality of terrorism, global warming, a growing disparity between those who have and those who have not, and many more problems you could add. Technological mastery

has done nothing to meet these problems. Indeed, ironically, we find ourselves more out of control than ever before. We are far from being masters of our world; instead, we feel more and more helpless and powerless to do anything about the problems that we face in the world.

This helplessness is the other side of the dialectic; the other side of our love of mastery. We want to be masters of life; on the other hand, we sense that we are powerless.

Our sense of powerlessness has had disastrous consequences. It has, on the one hand, encouraged us to place our confidence not in ourselves but in those who present themselves as being technocrats and experts and leaders. “Just leave the problems up to us,” the technocrats of business and government say, “We will find the solutions to all that ails you.” “Do not put your trust in nobles, in mortals, in whom there is no help,” says the Psalmist. “When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans shall perish.” The Psalmist then says, “Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Sovereign their God.” (Psalm 146:4-5)

The starkest example of a request to place our trust not in God but in leaders and technocrats occurred just after 9/11. President Bush declared that he and his administration would look after the problem of terrorism for us. We will handle the problem, he said. At the same time, recognizing the economic consequences of the 9/11 attack, the president urged us not to worry; instead, we should go shopping! Would it not have been far better for the president to ask us to come together as a people in thousands and thousands of neighborhood and town meetings and explore the reasons behind the terrible attack, and together discern what kind of direction we ought to take?

And so, once again, in spite of all the talk of being in control of the situation, we were left feeling powerless once again.

In the face of this sense of powerlessness, we as human beings are retreating into our own private worlds where we can still sense that we have a measure of control over our lives. People do not even want to go to the polls and exercise that most basic involvement in supporting the public, common good. Writes Christopher Lasch in his book *The Culture of Narcissism*:

Americans have retreated to purely personal preoccupations. Having no hope of improving their lives in any of the ways that matter, people have convinced themselves that what matters is psychic self-improvement: getting in touch with their feelings, eating healthy foods, taking lessons in ballet or belly-dancing, immersing themselves in the wisdom of the East, jogging, learning how to “relate,” overcoming the “fear of pleasure.” Harmless in themselves, these pursuits, elevated to a program and wrapped in the rhetoric of authenticity and awareness, signify a retreat from politics and a repudiation of... the past.
(p. 4)

My friends, given the spirit of our times, given the rhetoric of mastery on the one hand, and the sense of powerlessness and despair on the other, we can say that as a culture we are facing a spiritual crisis. Our culture seems to be at a loss for meaning. We no longer have the spiritual depth that will enable us to live meaningfully in this world of ours.

In this spiritual vacuum, we are being given a measure of courage and hope through the image of the steward as we find it in our biblical tradition. The vocation of stewardship avoids both the notion of mastery and the reality of helplessness. The steward, in the biblical sense, is not in charge, in control. Adam is commanded to till and keep the garden. The steward has the responsibility to care for that which belongs to another. “The earth belongs to God,” writes the psalmist, “the earth and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.” As stewards, our responsibility has nothing to do with mastery; it has everything to do with caring for the earth and its people.

On the other hand, the image of the steward avoids that pervasive sense of helplessness that has set into our culture. The steward is not indifferent towards the creation. The steward is not passive. The steward is not helpless. The steward is actively engaged in the responsibility to care for all that which belongs to God. The steward is called to attend to the needs of the neighbor and the common good of all, indeed the needs of the earth itself. Accepting the vocation of stewardship can help us rise above our apathy and indifference and sense of powerlessness.

We have so many biblical examples of what it means to be a steward. The two widows of today’s scripture come to mind. The widow of

Zaraphath gives all that she has first to the prophet Elijah; only then does she feed her own family. The widow of Mark's Gospel does not give just a portion of her income to the temple treasury. She gives her whole livelihood. That is exactly what a steward does. He or she gives everything that he or she is for the wellbeing of the neighbor and the earth itself. The steward can do just that because the steward trusts that God will provide. Writes the psalmist, "God gives food to the hungry . . . God sets the prisoners free. . . God watches over the strangers, and upholds the orphan and the widow." (Psalm 146, selected)

Finally, a personal word about the church. For me, the church, especially our beloved Church of the Crossroads, has become a community ready always to remind me that the whole idea of human mastery is a dead end street, and that despair and hopelessness and powerlessness cannot be the final word when it comes to human life and responsibility. The church has become the community that calls me and you to be stewards of the whole of life. Not only that, but the church in my life has become that community of men and women, young and old, who have and are still learning how to support one another in the timely vocation of stewardship.

For these reasons, alone, we willingly and freely give to the church, our beloved community, not only of our energy and talents, but of our financial resources as well. The most important commitments to our beloved community we can make on a yearly basis are the commitments we make when we prayerfully fill out our pledge card and our pledge of time and commitment to the ministry and mission of our church,

Without the church and it reminding us of our vocation as stewards in the service of the earth and its people, we would be at a loss. We would not know who we are or whose we are. Belonging to our beloved community takes us out of my own preoccupations and places us in the loving service of others and of the creation itself. And so it is that today and always we pray: God help us always to be the faithful stewards we are called to be. Amen.