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Stewardship Weekend Sermonettes
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First Lesson & Commentary – Time

I wonder what Noah must have been thinking when God spoke to him that day. I mean, there's a lot to process here! God was going to destroy the world because of its wickedness, but Noah and his family would be spared. How so? He would have to build an ark, a gigantic seagoing barge that was to be 450-feet long (as long as a football field and a half), 75-feet wide – wider even than our sanctuary! – and as tall as a four-story building, and oh by the way, he had to build it by himself with none of our modern machinery or methods to help him. No wonder God gave him 120 years to finish this project!

But then that wasn't all – Noah and his family would live inside the ark, cooped up with at least two representatives of every kind of animal on earth that they would be responsible to feed and take care of as long as God saw fit, which turned out to be an entire year in the end.

Add to that fact that we don't know whether Noah had any idea how to undertake this kind of building project, and it seems like Noah was in a real predicament here. Was he any kind of builder? Had he ever worked with wood or pitch? Had he ever been on a boat or on open water? We can't say for sure, but what we can say is that this was a monumental task that the Lord asked of Noah.

Well maybe you've never had to build an ark with your bare hands like Noah did, but sometimes service to God can seem that way to us, too. There is so much to do, so much red tape involved with codes and regulations, so much that's complicated nowadays with technology and finances and everything else. Well we might not have a lot of expertise in all these areas, but our best guess is neither did Noah. What he did have to give, though, was his time, his willingness to learn and try, and his trust that God knew best even if he didn't totally understand the whole picture yet. And here today as well, friends, those can be the best gifts we can give to God's Church, too.

See, when it comes to contributing to the ongoing function of this congregation, what matters most of all is that we are all here together doing the Lord's work and serving faithfully in whatever capacity he's

given to us, because the truth is that every one of us is important and invaluable to the mission of God's church. See, faithful Christian stewardship of our time isn't really about *what* we can do, at least not at its heart. It's so much more about just *being there* alongside everyone else, working shoulder-to-shoulder, being willing to try and learn and grow and train if necessary, and finding a way for everyone to fit together to complete the big, beautiful puzzle that is Christian life and service in this world.

So what that takes is time and investment, and *taking* time in this busy modern world means intentionally *making* time for service and stewardship. I don't have to tell you how busy we all are. But I also hope I don't have to tell you how much your God loves you and wants your commitment and how much we Christians need each other. We make time for the things that mean the most to us, so for the sake of your Savior, friends, let's make sure we're purposefully and intentionally making time to serve him. Whether it's ushering at church or hanging flyers on doorknobs around town or helping hand out pumpkins or being a part of a congregational meeting or work day or whatever else, prioritize it, put it on the calendar, and plan around it. Noah took maybe as much as 120 years to build the ark, so maybe you can take three years to serve on a board or committee or even just one school year to serve in our Sunday School. The fact is that there are all kinds of opportunities to take part in the mission and work of this congregation – just look in the service folder each week or check the bulletin boards in the narthex and you'll find ways to do that. Or if you have other, better ideas to share, that's great, too! In Christ's church, everyone has a place, everyone has a voice, and everyone has a part to play. It's just a matter of taking the time and seizing the opportunity.

No, dedicating yourself and your time to God's service is becoming not much more popular nowadays than it was back in the time of Noah. But we do it for the same reason that Noah did: he believed that his faith in God and faithfulness to God was the only thing that really mattered in this world, and the only thing that would last through the flood and into eternity. And we serve with that same confidence now too, friends. So like Noah, let's follow God's Word in faith, let's be thankful for all the time and opportunities God gives us together, and let's all be united and engaged to take advantage of them for his glory.

Second Lesson & Commentary – Treasures

Yes, I know what you're probably thinking. Money is a dirty word in church. People don't like to hear about it, they don't like to talk about it, they don't want it to *be* in church. And yet, there is nowhere more important to talk about money and how to use it than in the house of God, because he is the one who gives us our money in the first place and he is the only source that we can really trust for how to use it well.

See, we all have a sinful, selfish part of us deep down that doesn't want to follow God and would much rather take and hoard than give and share. But friends, that's not what controls us anymore; let's repent of that, let's crucify that, and let's just try to get by that awkward discomfort right away, because we follow Christ in joy and love and thanks now. Don't worry, I'm not planning on shaking anyone down before you leave or making you hand over your W-2s. All I want is for us to open our hearts to listen to what our good and gracious God has to say about how we can best use the treasures he gives us and really grow in our lives of faithful Christian stewardship.

And in Paul's letters to the Corinthians, he gives us great principles to do just that. Paul was instructing the Corinthians here about how to show their love for their neighbors and especially for their fellow believers in practice. Well Paul was no fool when it came to how the human heart works, so he gave them some important guidelines and reminders to help them be organized and regular about their giving so it didn't fall by the wayside because of selfishness or carelessness.

What Paul teaches us here is that our Christian giving should be intentional, purposeful, generous, and properly motivated. See, the first thing for us to understand is that what truly matters about any of our offerings in God's sight, whether they be talents, time, treasures, or anything else, isn't the substance or the sheer amount of the offering. It's the attitude of faith that comes from a generous heart of love and thanks to God, and that's going to dictate all the other details of the offerings we give. Take the story of the poor widow in Jesus' day, for example, who dropped her two tiny coins into the offering box at the temple. Jesus said that woman put every last cent she had into that offering box. It may not have seemed like much, but whatever may have lacked in the size of her offering was more than made up for by the size of her trust. She may not have known exactly how, but she

knew that God would care for her and give her everything she needed, regardless of whether she had those coins or not. The truth is, she wasn't really just giving that fraction of a penny to God that day. She was giving her whole self into his hands, and our Savior promises that that kind of generosity and faith will certainly be blessed.

See, Jesus used that widow's example to teach us the same thing Paul is saying here: what matters in God's sight isn't the amount of an offering as such; it's the *proportionality* – God wants us to give in proportion to our income, true; but even more, he wants us to give in proportion to the love and thankfulness we have for him and everything he's done for us. God doesn't want us to just give from our surplus, from our *leftovers* – no matter how much they might be. No, God wants us to give our firstfruits from our hearts, to prioritize supporting the Lord's work first and foremost in faith.

So friends, let's learn this lesson about the privilege and joy that is generous stewardship of the treasures God gives us. God has blessed each of us richly, and now he calls us to return a portion of our blessings back to him in love and thanks and support for his Gospel ministry. See, for Christians, *not* giving back to God isn't an option. The Christ who was rich, yet for our sakes became poor so that through his poverty we might become rich, makes that unthinkable for us. God has been so good and generous to us, so how can we not be generous in return? No, let's use our offerings to prove our love for our Savior and to support his work so that more and more can come to know Christ along with us. Ministry costs money, it's true. But what's also true is that the more money we have, the more and better ministry we can do together. So when you go home this week, I want you to give special thought to how fully and how well you're supporting the Lord's work here at Good Shepherd; maybe give thought to how you can help us eliminate our project debt or start a nest egg for other projects or expansions to come in the future; and maybe even consider signing up for automatic offering donations. That's an easy, dependable service that ensures you're prioritizing your support for this congregation in the regular, intentional, cheerful way that God really wants. So friends, remember that in God's eyes, however much or little you may have doesn't matter. Let's all simply give God our best – faithfully, generously, and proportionately – because that's what he gave to us first, and we know that we can never out-give him.

Third Lesson & Commentary – Talents

There was really nothing unfair or unclear about what this rich man did when he entrusted his wealth to his servants while he was gone. There were no ifs, ands, or buts about it – this master had expectations that he wanted to see fulfilled, and by all accounts he set his servants up perfectly well to fulfill them. Before he left town, he called his servants together and gave them each a number of *talents* of gold, the original Greek says – that was a weight measurement that was roughly equivalent to 20 years' worth of a common laborer's wages. While he was gone those servants were to do whatever they saw fit with the money they were given, and when he returned to settle up, we hear those three servants reporting back to him. The first two were commended by the rich man and rewarded for the work they did, but the last one was condemned and lost everything.

Well, this is a story that can come across a little harsh and a little cold at first glance, especially with how it ends up; but it's also a story that bears in it some really important truths when it comes to our stewardship of the talents God gives us. Maybe more than anything, this story really speaks to that idea that we are stewards, managers or caretakers of something that does not truly belong to us. Remember who all the money came from in the parable. It didn't belong to the servants; it wasn't theirs. It was the rich man's. He gave it to them, he entrusted it to them to be used faithfully, in accordance with his wishes, and in a way that would further his purposes.

And the same thing goes for the special gifts and abilities each of us has in our lives, too. They come from the Giver of every good and perfect gift, and he gives them for a reason: so that we use those gifts in his service. See, when God gives us a blessing, he always gives it to us with a purpose. He gives blessings *to* us so that he can give blessings *through* us. Just like in the parable Jesus told in our Gospel lesson for today, our God didn't give us our gifts to be hidden or hoarded. No, he gave them to us so that they could be utilized and shared.

And that's a truth that's important for us to come to terms with. We have some very special people here at Good Shepherd who have unique skills and abilities and training that not just anybody else does. We have people who are big and strong; we have people who are very wise and intelligent; we have people who are very people-savvy and technologically-inclined; we have people who can do all sorts of construction and automotive and handyman work; we have people who are excellent with financial

planning, budgeting, and investment; and of course that's only scratching the surface of the many gifts that God has given to his people here at Good Shepherd. God has given those talents as gifts of his grace, purely because he loves you and delights in you and because he wants you to be able to use those gifts to provide for yourselves, your families, your community, and your congregation. God has given you those talents so that you can serve those around you in love and glorify him in return for all his goodness. That's what he *wants* to see, and that's what he *loves* to see.

So then what a special comfort it is the way the master in our parable here commended his servants. He didn't commend them based on their results; he commended them based on their attitude. It wasn't about how much extra money they earned; what he was most delighted with was the fact that they were trustworthy with whatever they were given. So that means if you're feeling a little left out or like you don't stack up to anyone else around here, you don't have to feel that way anymore because your life and your service to God isn't about comparing yourself to others. It's about being faithful to your loving Lord.

No, service to God isn't a matter of *whether* you have gifts or not. It's a matter of identifying *what* gifts you do have and how you can find a way to apply them in your life and in God's church. Yes, some people's gifts might be more obvious than others – even in the story, each servant had more or fewer talents they were given – but sometimes those whose gifts make them more fit for behind the scenes support are the most valuable. After all, it isn't the shingles and the siding that keeps a house standing. It's the foundation and the framework. And you too can be that foundation of God's church when you stop worrying about what you *don't* have to give and when you start giving whatever you *do* have – maybe it's your example of love and respect for your spouse and children and neighbors, your dedication to growing in God's Word, your kindness, your patience, your service, your encouragement, your counsel, or whatever else it may be. So forget the fears and excuses that tempt us to turn into that third servant, to hide our gifts and not use them the way our God intends, and know instead that your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is ready and eager to say to you one day, too, “*Well done, good and faithful servant!*” Yes, you too have been given special abilities, special *trusts* from God that are worth far more than any bag of gold, and so that means every single one of us has unique gifts and talents to use in his service. So friends, *let's use them* faithfully, well, and to his glory. Amen.