

Warning: Christian Stewardship Is Radically Dangerous



Soon and very soon - if not already - churches will launch their Stewardship Season.

In many churches, this becomes something akin to an NPR membership drive. It's "all commercials all the time" with actual programming intermittently dispersed among the pleading and prodding to become members (meaning, contribute to the cost of programming - "If you like this music/program/news, please make your pledge today.").

Then, after the pledges are received and the goals have or have not been met, it all goes away.

Until next year.

Lots of people in church circles are talking about how Stewardship Season needs to be more than just once a year. And, that we need to talk more about Stewardship in terms of more than money. It's a return to the old "time, talent AND treasure" that has been the consistent message of the church. Well, at least, The Episcopal Church.

The current trend is to claim that "Stewardship is, essentially, story-telling." Indeed, story-telling is an important vehicle to make Stewardship incarnational, but I think we have put the stewardship cart before the ecclesiastical horse, as it were.

Here's my claim: Stewardship, authentic Christian Stewardship, is radically dangerous. It has the potential to transform us and the church.

I would submit that, whatever failings we have experienced in our own "Christian pledge drives" stem from the fact that we do not grasp this concept. Or, maybe we do, which is why our Stewardship Season looks more like NPR Pledge Drives.

There are two major flaws in our process.

The first is that the message of 10% "strive to tithe" model is falling on deaf ears because our parishioners know that this is based on the assumption that the church is the major social outreach/service/justice organization in the community.

There was a time when this was once true. It is no longer.

This came clear to me when a former parishioner came up to me and said, "Rev'd Elizabeth, I hear about striving to tithe, and I want to do that, and I've discovered that I am."

"Here, look. This is my family income. This is what I give to the church. And, this is what I give to support various community organizations that I think are doing the REAL work of the gospel - shelters for domestic violence, disaster relief efforts, community food banks, unemployment counseling and the provision of interviewing skills, resume development and clothing for interviews."

"When I add all that up, I'm actually tithing 12%. When you add what I give to the church in terms of fundraisers and supplies for coffee hour and various parish events, it's even higher."

And then he said, "When the church starts doing all this work, I'm happy to shift my funding from those organizations to the work of the church. But," he added, "maybe it isn't the job of the church in today's world to do all that. Maybe the church needs to be the church - providing spiritual nourishment and foundation for our work as Christians in the world - and we, as the Church need to support the work of the church in the world."

"Maybe," he said, "the church needs to re-think it's message about 'strive to tithe' and support the work of the church in the world, too."

See what I mean? I don't think he's the only one who has figured that out.

Indeed, it is not an over-statement to say that many of our churches are liturgical museums, some of which feature excellent liturgy, music and preaching but it is disconnected to any clarity or focus about how the church - THAT church - puts its faith into action.

Oh, some congregations are like "social justice candy stores" - there are soup kitchens, and food pantries and environmental justice projects, but mostly, these are "pet projects" of individuals which are claimed by the church. There is no direct connection between these individual acts of charity and "good works" with the focus and mission of the church.

The result is that what people hear, beyond the "message" and despite our best efforts, is that their money is going to support the organizational structure of the church - to pay for administrative costs, salaries, etc.

That may or may not be true but that's what they hear because we have not "connected the dots" - either for ourselves or others.

At least NPR Pledge Drives - and some churches - are more honest about this in the message they give during Stewardship Season.

And then we wonder why folks revert to a corporate business model and apply that to the business of the church.

The business of the church is not being the church.

The business of the church is doing the mission of God.

Everything - Every. Thing. - is in support of that.

If we aren't absolutely clear and consistent about that, then we have no one to blame but ourselves when people in the pews can't hear the theology of Stewardship.

We are talking in a language that is foreign to them.

If we don't live our theology, our talk sounds to folk like the clanging bell of an NPR campaign. In their heads, they just change stations, momentarily, until the program resumes.

As the hand drawing above explains, we need to be consistently "on point" and "on message" about the theology of Stewardship. This is but one neat, concise theological foundation which is grounded in scripture. It may not be YOUR theology, exactly, but it's a good start.

Take a look:

RELATIONSHIP

Leviticus 26:12

God desires a close relationship with us. God loved us before we loved God. Our relationship with God is not one of equals since God is the Owner and we are the stewards of God's possessions.

OWNERSHIP

Psalm 24:1

God is the owner of everything and God has transferred dominion over creation to us (Genesis 1:26). As faithful stewards, we understand that we have been assigned the management or stewardship of God's possession. We are responsible to the Owner for the manner in which we conduct our stewardship responsibilities.

POSSESSIONS

Proverbs 3:9-10

Because God loves us, God has blessed us with many possessions, such as time, talent, and treasure. The way we use our possessions demonstrates our love to God. As faithful stewards, we must use our possessions for God's glory, to benefit others, and not for personal gain.

SACRIFICE

Romans 12:1

The Hebrew word used in the Old Testament for sacrifice is "korban", and it means to come close to God. Sin separated us from God, but Christ's death on the cross, as the sacrifice for our sins, provided a way for us to come close to God. As a Christian, living for Christ is our sacrifice to God. When we use our possessions (time, talents, and treasures) to God's glory and to benefit others, we signal to God, and to the world, our desire to have a close relationship with God.

LOVE

John 15:9

God is love. Stewardship that is based on God's love allows us to look beyond the faults of others while using our possessions to supply their needs (John 13:34,35). The thumb is the only finger that can touch all of the other fingers, so our love for God and for others must permeate all aspects of our stewardship experience. Stewardship is God's love in action.

I'm not offering this as "the" theology of stewardship or "the" scriptural basis for it. It's one way to think about it. Develop your own. Do it with members of your congregation. Make it clear, simple and concise.

Here's the key, however: **Do not teach this if you can not illustrate how the church - YOUR church - is living out the scripture and making that theology real.** Tell stories about THAT and watch your

pledged amount increase.

Have your clergy and parishioners tell stories about how they live out their theology in the context of their lives outside the church walls and how the church supports them in their everyday lives of faith and you've got something that will not only improve your Stewardship Pledge Drive but enrich the faith life of your congregation.

Of course, you actually have to support people in their every day lives of faith beyond the walls of the church in order to have any integrity with and validity to your claims.

There's another consideration, however. Something that has to happen as the foundational, operational principle to any theology or work of Stewardship. Something that makes sense of why the incarnational aspects of story-telling are so essential to Stewardship.

If there is any real flaw to our understanding of Stewardship - besides consistency of teaching and congruence with our mission - it is that we have failed, miserably, in terms of Catechesis.

I am using the word Catechesis quite intentionally. I believe that good Catechesis combines Christian **formation** with Christian **education** as well as the education and formation we receive during the liturgy of Word and Sacrament.

I think this is the most important piece of our Stewardship.

Churches are filled with good people, well-intentioned people, even deeply spiritual people - many of whom have no idea what it means to be Christian. Oh, they claim to be Christian and earnestly desire to live good Christian lives, but they really have no idea what that means beyond some schlocky sentimentality that reads more like a Hallmark Card than anything that has to do with scripture or theology.

That's not their fault.

I think we - clergy and laity and, yes, bishops - have forgotten that Jesus was a Rabbi. Besides healing and advocacy (social justice), teaching was the primary function of his ministry and preaching.

Unfortunately, the church has evolved into the same religious organization which Jesus preached against. We've become administrators, modeling the business of the church on corporate business models in almost every aspect of our common lives of faith.

That needs to change.

The model of the church in the Third Millennium needs to return to looking more like the church of the First Millennium. That's a much longer process but I would submit to you that this transformation is already happening.

Look around. You'll see evidence of that everywhere. Mostly, though, it's being cited as evidence of the failure of our Stewardship. I think it looks different in God's eyes.

In order for Christianity to be "successful", we need to get "back to the future" and become less an organization and more of a movement.

Yes, I know what that means for the "success" of the church. When we begin to get serious about what

Stewardship really means, I think our understanding of a "successful church" will begin to change radically. It would look much more pre-Constantinian. And, I think that radical change would gladden the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

This is why I say that Christian Stewardship is radically dangerous.

I know. I know. I've not given you any "quick fixes". No slick Stewardship Programs in a three-ring binder with a catchy slogan and an informative DVD that you can use this year - once a year - and then forget about it until next Fall.

I have a few of those programs which I adapted from the stellar work of Terry Parsons who used to head up the Stewardship and Evangelism desk at the Episcopal Church Center. They are good beginnings - programs, bible studies, adult forums. You can still find some of them online at the Episcopal Church web page.

Human incarnation takes nine months.

Institutional incarnation takes even longer.

We need to work on the DNA and genetics of Christian Stewardship - getting back to and rediscovering and reclaiming the scripture and theology of what it means to be a Christian.

That's more than a Stewardship Program.

Christian Stewardship is radically dangerous. It is a gradual process which leads to transformation of individual souls as well as the corporate soul of the church.

That's not something you'll hear in an NPR Pledge Drive.

Consider yourself warned.

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Blessings,

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