

Jeremiah 14:7-10, 19-22; Psalm 84:1-7; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14

By further introduction, now that you've heard me proclaim the Gospel, you know that I'm not from New Zealand, nor from Pennsylvania. Not only am I from Louisiana, I'm from Lafayette, Louisiana, which is 120 miles west of New Orleans. There's more to Louisiana than New Orleans. And what's significant about where I come from is that Lafayette is the capital city of Arcadiana, which is where the majority of Louisiana Cajuns reside. I am a Louisiana Cajun. I grew up on the Bayou Teche, which, if you know anything about Louisiana by reading Longfellow's poem *Evangeline*, it's a story about Evangeline and her fiancé, Gabriel, going up and down the Bayou Teche looking for each other. I'm from that same Bayou.

I'm been a Catholic priest for 48 years in the Diocese of Lafayette and I retired six years ago. And now that I'm retired I do what retirees do; I do what I want to do. And so for the last six years I have gone around the USA – in 2003, I was in 15 states – spreading the Gospel of Stewardship. And that's what brings me here.

I met your pastor – he and I are on the workshop team for Kirby-Smith Associates. We give workshops on stewardship. We were together last weekend in Colorado Springs giving workshops on stewardship. I'm very, very glad to be called here with you, today. I've been here since Friday as a house guest of your pastor and his lovely wife, and I've enjoyed the hospitality of Trinity Lutheran. I'm very blessed to have been called here.

I want to apologize, because the bulk of my talk is from my Catholic experience. But, I'm sure that some of it resonates back into the Lutheran experience.

About 12 or 13 years ago, the Catholic Bishops of the United States together published a beautiful pastoral to the Catholics of America. It's called "Stewardship, A Disciples Response." And then, what the bishops really did, 12 years ago, was to affirm and support a movement that started in the Catholic Church some 34 years ago, of trying to make stewardship a way of life in Catholic churches and dioceses all over the United States. And they do a beautiful job in this pastoral pointing out that stewardship is biblically based, theologically and spiritually sound, and is nothing new. It is part of our heritage, getting back to the beginning of the Old Testament.

Now, simply put, "Stewardship is what I do with what I have, when I believe in God." Notice where it starts – with faith. If I really believe in God, then I'm concerned about what I do with what God has given me – all that God has given me – in service to God, love of God and love of neighbor. "Stewardship is what I do with what I have when I believe in God."

I got involved in this because the last 10 years I was the active pastor of St. Mary's in Lafayette City, I spent those 10 years trying to learn about stewardship and to make stewardship a way of life in St. Mary's parish. And so, I not only talk the talk, I have walked the walk. I've come to realize that the quality of stewardship of ones life – as a baptized Christian trying to be a disciple – the quality of stewardship is a barometer of ones faith. Tell me about anyone here at Trinity Lutheran that you know has got a deep, strong faith, and I don't have to ask if that person's stewardship is of high quality. I know that. By the same token, someone who is not a very good steward probably has a very shallow faith. More than that, I've come to realize that no baptized Christian of whatever stripe or color – Lutheran, Catholic, Presbyterian, whatever – we can't really claim to be true Christians as an individual or as a member of a church unless we, as individuals, or our church parish, are really trying hard to make stewardship a way of life. So, it's a litmus test. Stewardship is a barometer of ones faith and a litmus test of ones Christianity, discipleship. Stewardship is a disciple's response. At baptism we are called to join Jesus in his life and to spend our lives trying to be a disciple of Jesus. God loves us just the way we are, but he won't leave us that way, he wants us to be more and more like Jesus.

So, the practice of stewardship, then, for individual Christians is soul cleansing – and that’s important, and I’ll develop that – but it’s also practical, because it’s a practical way of solving crises in all Christian churches. That is the crisis of not enough money to operate, and the crisis of not enough ministers to operate.

Let’s talk briefly about ministry. I know you’ll be developing more about that in Lent.

In 1962, I was already a priest for six years, the new pope, John XXIII, listening to the rumblings of the Holy Spirit and his own soul, called together 3000 Catholic Bishops of the world and invited other denominations to join in investigating our Church. Convinced as he was at 77 years old, having been a Christian, a priest, a cardinal, and then Pope, that the Church at this point in history was broken. And as a priest of six years, I was convinced he was right; that we needed to rewrite the script. And the Pope said to the gathered assembly at the beginning, he said, we must re-examine the practices of our Church in 1962 based on our roots. The roots being three-fold, the Bible, Old and New Testaments, Jesus, and the practice of the early Church. And so, they proceeded for three years, three falls, three months each time, to do just that. And they did revolutionize Christianity.

One of the things that they did was to discuss the role of ministry in our Church. And as they did that, they came to realize that it was broken. As they examined the practices of the early Church and the Bible and Jesus, they came to realize that the early Church had it right. It bloomed and blossomed without very many priests, and yet ministry abounded. It’s sort of like in contemporary society. The fastest growing denomination of Christianity are the Mormons. They have no priests and yet they’re bound in ministry because the baptized serve all the needed roles of ministry in that Church.

As the Vatican II people examined, they got to realize that between the early Church and 1960 things had gone kablooey. And that instead of being like the early Church, contemporary Christians overloaded all ministry on the backs of priests and pastors, and the laity had been suppressed, reduced to pacifity. The role of the laity to that point was three-fold; to pray, to pay and to obey. And to stay out of the sanctuary, especially women. The whole thing got changed. They started preaching and wrote some beautiful documents. The primary one I’m going to refer to is “The Role of the Laity.” They awakened in our Church a sleeping giant – the lay people.

So, Vatican II had again stressed the call to ministry issued at baptism. Each adult, baptized Christian has a role to play among those actually serving and ministering. So aware and educated and committed adult, baptized, Christians, want to exercise their ministry and to serve. And to realize – and this is a great step – that up to this point the average lay person felt that, I belong to the Church and I go to church and now all of a sudden I bloom into an awareness that I am Church. It’s a big step. And each baptized Christian, then, should recognize his or her gift from the creating God, and bring that gift in service to his or her local faith community. That is proper stewardship of time and talent called the ministry of the baptized. Baptism, then, demands that laity not be satisfied with just being pew-warmers and pew-potatoes, but to a faith-filled baptized Christian, aspiring to be a disciple, stewardship is not a noun, it’s a verb. It’s a tremendous conversion process.

About stewardship of treasure – let’s go back to the early beginnings of humanity, God’s first chosen people recorded in the early books of the Bible – in Genesis, in Deuteronomy, in Ecclesiastics. You might be surprised to see there the conviction of God’s people, that it was God’s doing through which they had everything. It was, in that simplistic mind – an agrarian society without the benefits of modern science – they were convinced that it was God’s goodness. It was God’s rain, God’s sunshine, the fertility God planted in the seeds that they planted, the fertility God planted in sheep and goats and calves and pigs, that made all that they had possible. And so, at harvest time, to thank God, to praise God, they would say, God we owe you something back. Eventually, that became called tithing.

The two aspects that we need to remind ourselves about tithing, not only giving God some percentage – the hallowed is 10 – but also it was now that we have all this stuff, we’ve got wheat, we’ve got calves, we’ve got sheep, we’ve got piglets, we’ve got little goats running around here, God we’re going to give you a tenth, but we’re going to give you the first sheaf of wheat, the first little lamb, the first calve, the

first piglet. God – first commandment, you are our only God – we serve you with everything we’ve got, we give you our best, we give you our first. In Deuteronomy God says, I’m a jealous God. I’m not satisfied with left-overs.

Now, as this practice grew, in the Old Testament, we see in the later books of the Old Testament reasons given why that was an important part of devotional life of God’s people. And the three reasons are good and they apply today. Tithing was a good thing for God’s people and God’s people’s souls for these three reasons.

First; tithing was a way of acknowledging that God was the giver and source of all, the Lord of all, the dominion all. And that God’s people were not owners of what they had, but were stewards of what they. They had God’s stuff to deal with in serving each other and God.

Second reason. Again, in a simpler society there was no federal tax, there was no government, there was no welfare, there was no social security, but there were widows and orphans and poor that they had to take care of. So, with the stuff they got from tithing, they were able to take care of the widows, the poor and the orphans.

Third reason given, still in the Old Testament, that tithing was good for the individual soul, because it was a way of combating within ones soul, greed, pride, selfishness, and irreligion.

As you would expect, they carried that into the new Church. The first Christians were converted from Judaism; they were Jews who knew these practices, knew the Old Testament, and they carried that into the new Church. As the new Church grew and bloomed and blossomed, of course, there had to be organization and rules, and as early as the year 600 there were rules made for Christians about tithing. This next fact overwhelmed me when I first read it – as recently as 1800; the rules for the Catholics in the Church were that if they did not tithe they were excommunicated. I wondered to myself, what happened to the Catholic Church since then? Why are we not like the non-Catholics, the majority for whom tithing is still a very important part of their devotional life? What happened to the Catholic Church? After all, we come from the same background as the non-Catholic Christians, from the Old Testament and the New Testament, Jesus and the early Church. We Catholics, in the last 200 years, have dropped a stitch. Why?

Well, it took me a long time before I finally got an answer at the Catholic Stewardship Convention - I’ve been to the last 17. Well, I went to a talk about 10 years ago given by the then Bishop of Florida, who humbly gave his walk of life into stewardship as a Christian, as a priest, and as a bishop. He proudly said that for the last 18 years in our Diocese of St. Augustine we’ve tried hard to make stewardship a way of life for all parishes in the diocese in many, many ways. On the same Sunday in Lent we renew our stewardship. In that process, my role of Bishop is to continue to harp on my priests to preach the whole Gospel. Bingo!! I found in that statement, the answer to my question, “What happened to the Catholic Church in last 200 years.” The hierarchical, the preaching, the teaching Church has not preached the whole Gospel, because we have not preached what Jesus preaches about money. That’s a bold statement. Let me substantiate that.

If you look from those perspectives at Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, you find out that, first of all, Jesus addresses the dangers of money more than that of sexual immorality or heaven or hell. Let’s look at just some of the passages. First of all, of the thirty-six parables, twenty-two of the ones Jesus told refer to some kind of sharing of time, talent and treasure – stewardship. Some particular examples. How many times Jesus stresses in the four gospels how hard, if not impossible it is, for the rich to enter into heaven. He starts the Sermon on the Mount, The Beatitudes, the first one is, “blessed are the poor in spirit.”

Jesus tells the parable of Lazarus and the rich man in this side of the after-life on earth, and then what happened when they died. The roles are reversed – in this life Lazarus is poor and starving and the rich man had everything. When they got to heaven it was reversed. The rich man was in hell; Lazarus was in the bosom of Abraham. Notice how astute Jesus is, the master teacher, he exonerates Lazarus by giving him a name in this parable. The rich man doesn’t even have a name.

One of my favorites is the encounter of the rich, young man with Jesus. He came to Jesus and said, "I'm impressed. I'm impressed with what you're saying, how you live, what you advocate. I want to be your disciple. I want to follow you. What more should I do?" Jesus says, "What do you think?" The young man says, "I know the Ten Commandments." And he rattled them off. And then he said, "And I keep them." Jesus said, "Then you're well on your way." But the young man says, "What more should I do?" Jesus says, "Well, if you really want to follow me and be my disciple, go and sell all you have, and come and follow me." Notice, that young man doesn't have a name either. The next line is the last we hear from him in Matthew's Gospel. It says, "He walked away because he was attached to his possessions."

The last, and most striking example of Jesus in the Gospel - he says, "Do you really want to be my disciple? Then you cannot serve two masters. You cannot serve God and the devil at the same time." If you know the Bible, you know I am misquoting the Bible. That's what the people listening to him expected him to say, that's what we would expect him to say. That ain't what he said. He said, "You cannot be my disciple and serve two masters at the same time. You cannot serve God and mammon at the same time." Notice how astute Jesus was, he knew the Father - first commandment - and he knew the human soul. And he knew that excessive love of money, attachment to possessions, wanting to own more and more things, was the arch-rival for God in the typical soul. And so he elaborated on that and said it over and over again.

Why? Well, because Jesus knew that the rich get greedier and greedier and they are never satisfied. They want more and more and more. An example, a phenomenon that has occurred in our country, America. I'm a world-traveler, I've been to Paris ten times, I've been all over Europe. I don't see there what I see in America as I travel around. One specific difference. If what Jesus is talking about is true of the typical Christian soul, it's more true about the typical American Christian soul. What I'm getting at is - and it's only developed in the last thirty or forty years - we have so much, we want so much. We want more and more. So we build bigger closets and bigger barns and we still don't have enough room, so now we got to rent storage bins. All over the countryside, wherever I go, I see these acres and acres of storage bins. Will we ever use that stuff again? "No." Jesus would say, "Give it away. Don't pay more to store stuff you ain't going to use. Give it away." So the antidote Jesus has for this crippling disease, for this fatal disease of the spiritual soul, is - Give it away! Share it. Don't cling to your possessions. To the young man, "Go and sell all you have and come and follow me." Bingo! That is the basis - the spiritual, biblical, the theological basis for stewardship of time, talent and treasure.

You have had an opportunity in these three Sundays to reflect on the quality of stewardship of your life. You have a card to fill out. One of the nice things about being retired is that I'm developing into being a real good Cajun cook. And one of my hero cooks is - you see him on the Food Channel if you watch it - Emeril Lagasse, who learned his cooking in New Orleans and does a lot of Cajun cooking. He says over and over again, "You gotta crank it up a notch." And so I'm saying, "You gotta crank up your stewardship a notch." Crank it up a notch.

After the last service, I had a great testimony by this man who's about my age. The reason he and his wife were talking to me is that their son's mother-in-law is from Louisiana. Then the man said, holding my hand, he said, "I want you to know you are effective. I had my card already filled out. After I heard your sermon I tore it up and I wrote a new one. I cranked it up a notch." I hope that can be said about all of you.

Let me conclude with one of my favorite stories. It's about Pierre. Pierre was a typical Cajun. Besides being of Cajun culture, the majority of Cajuns are Catholic but of different qualities of Catholic. Pierre was probably a typical Cajun who was a nominal Catholic. Pierre died and he came to an awareness that he was in a new kind of existence and he was in a line. And way at the top of the line, at the top of the hill, were the pearly gates. Then he realized why he was in line. At first he was very scared, like most of us would be, I'm sure. He was overwhelmed by what he should have done for God and for neighbor. The closer he got to the end of line, the better he felt about himself. So, he was pumped up until he heard St. Peter tell the lady right in front of him, "Mother Teresa, you could have tried a little harder." At which point, he was really scared. He knew he was in trouble. So, he started to duck. St. Peter grabbed him and said, "Wait, Pierre, you're next. I've been waiting for you. You know Pierre is French for Peter. I've been

waiting for this moment." Pierre said, "That's alright, I'll come back when you've in a better mood." "No, no," Peter says, "This is your shot. I've been getting ready for this moment. I've been reading the book of your life you've been writing."

Pierre says, "You got the wrong Pierre. I'm a dumb Cajun from Louisiana. I can barely read or write much less write a book." "No," Peter says. "This is Pierre Boujo, this is you." Pierre said, "That's my name, let me see that book." So he grabs it out of St. Peter's hand and says, "Where did you get that? That's my checkbook." "Well," St. Peter said, "That's all I had to go on. You wrote nothing else about your life. I've been through all your check books and I've yet to find God once in your book of life."

St. Peter closed the book, closed the pearly gates and said, "Pierre, you could have tried a little harder."

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