

The Real Issue

Stewardship Sunday
The Reverend Glenn E. Ludwig

Saturday and Sunday, October 23 & 24, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

James 1:17–22, 26–27

Among the many and varied sports that I enjoy, the one that probably gives me the most consistent pleasure is “people watching.” There is nothing quite like sitting at the end of the boardwalk in Ocean City, Maryland, on a warm summer evening, watching humanity parade by in all its glory, with all our foibles, idiosyncrasies and peculiarities on full display.

Well, it was when I was practicing this sport while sitting on the beach that a lesson on, of all things, stewardship, became acted out for me. With the disguise of reading a novel, I watched as a family of three made their way over the sand to the waters edge to set up camp for the day. Dad had the cooler. Mom had everything else. I smiled. And dribbling behind was the one who became the object of my observations that day – a three-year old little girl, urged on by mom to keep up.

Well, they got to their spot. Dad got his chair and sat; mom arranged the campsite – blanket, towels, umbrella, lotion on sibling, everything, including dumping out a whole carryall filled with toys.

It was at this point that the drama got interesting. Watching all this from a nearby location were two other children, about four and two. Their eyes literally bugged out of their heads when they saw the amount of toys their new neighbor had brought to play with. When they toddled over to make friends, the newly arrived one quickly perceived a threat to her kingdom, and began gathering all the dumped-out toys around her, trying desperately to protect them from the eager eyes that hoped she would share. Fear of loss to what we claim is ours is somehow learned very early. So I watched, while a frantic little girl tried to hold and protect all her toys from falling into someone else’s hands.

It was, at first glance, a comic scene. Without the physical coordination nor the size to manage all the objects, they kept dropping and falling. And when she stooped to pick those up, others would slip and fall out of reach.

I watched this scene, under my disguise of sunglasses and book, for almost fifteen minutes and in that time, the comic element soon became lost, to be replaced by the sadness of tragedy. For now, instead of a happy youngster sitting in the sand enjoying herself, I saw a fearful kid clutching desperately to herself what was hers. *There* was the sadness of it all. The tragedy of it all was that three children could have been enjoying themselves in an opportunity to share and play together. But the power of possession, the “it’s mine” attitude, reared its head and what I saw was an obsessed child and three isolated little people unable to relate and enjoy one another in the serendipity of an afternoon.

An ancient Rabbi once wrote: “We are born with fists clenched and die with our hands wide open.” And so it is.

We have all witnessed the tightly curled fist of a newborn, and what parent or grandparent hasn't delighted in prying the little fingers open so that the little one can hold onto one of our fingers. Children grow up learning to hold onto things: fingers and hands of adults, a bottle, food, toys, play-things. We eagerly push things into a child's hands, hoping thereby to teach some lesson of control, joy of possession, and satisfaction at the right use of objects.

An infant grows up to extend the implications of their early learning and reflexes. Soon, the child takes hold of everything in reach and coffee tables and end tables need to be child-proofed. And attitudes soon develop and begin to surface -- attitudes we may not always like. "It's mine!" "No, it's mine!" Fists close around objects and the power of possession is felt. The image of three children at the beach comes quickly to mind -- three children controlled by a fear of losing what is theirs.

My friends in Christ, the reality of real life, of life lived freely and responsibly, of life lived in community, is that it is in letting go, of opening up the hand, of setting free that growth and joy are found. In raising children, we learn that somewhere we must set them free, as painful and scary as that is. In marriage, the dynamic of a relationship is found in the freedom to continue to grow as individuals who enrich the life of the other. In the creative ventures of life, we open up and risk rejection and failure for the sake of a larger contribution one feels called to make. No artist, no writer, no performer can be creative and free without first letting go of self-consciousness and risking self-expression, for all art is basically self-disclosure.

But there is a deeper level still to my analogy of open and closed hands and to the reality of life. Theologian Paul Tillich has said it the most concisely: "Religion is first, an open hand to receive a gift, and second, an acting hand to distribute gifts."

And that is exactly the message behind all of our scriptural lessons for today. From Isaiah speaking for God and asking us the question: "Lift up your eyes on high. Who created these?" to James reminding us: "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father." For the Christian, all of life is a gift from the gracious and loving hand of God. We own nothing. We can claim nothing for our own. God, the author, the creator, the redeemer and sustainer of all that is, has given us life and all that surrounds us as a trust. We are stewards -- those who are accountable for what God has given us, and we really only manage things jointly with him; we never own them. The true reality of living is in the realization that we participate in life only by the grace of God. All that we are, all that we have, all that is is God's.

And that's the real issue for any stewardship message. We need to begin there. And when we finally know who owns the toys, who owns it all, we can begin to hold onto life not with closed fists, but with open hands, grateful to receive what God gives us in love, eager to share in love what God gives us as good stewards, and secure in the faith that God's graciousness will never run out.

Unfortunately, the church, in its eagerness to encourage good stewardship, has relied on gimmicks and slogans all too often. One of my favorite stories is about the pastor who needed to raise money for repairs to his church building. He had planned a special

worship service to explain the need for big gifts and became annoyed when he found out his regular organist was sick and a substitute had been brought in at the last minute. The sub wanted to know what to play.

"Here's a copy of the service," the pastor said impatiently. "But you'll have to think of something to play after I make the announcement about our finances."

During the service, the minister paused and said, "Brothers and sisters we are in great difficulty; the roof repairs cost twice as much as we expected, and we need \$10,000 more. Any of you who can pledge \$100 or more, please stand up."

It was at that moment, in a moment of inspiration, that the substitute organist played "The Star-Spangled Banner." And as the story goes, that is how the substitute became the regular organist!

Well, we won't use that approach today, because real giving, a life of giving, grows out of cooperation with Christ, no coercion by the church. True stewardship is not a response to pressure; it is a response to grace. How have you been blessed? What measure of gratitude do you have for the gifts God has placed in your hands, and how will you open those hands to share those gifts with others? Those are the critical questions that true stewardship asks.

You see, I don't think that anyone should ever be asked to pledge and support a church budget. But I do think that all of us should be called to examine our hands, to see the blessings and graces God has placed in them, and then to prayerfully consider how we can open them in giving and service to God through His instrument, the church. It is the ministry done in and through Trinity Church that brings blessings to lives. Like the families that have known peace of mind and heart in the midst of loss and death because this church reached out and embraced their hurts; like the blessing that comes each week as we gather in worship to hear words of welcome and forgiveness from God through sermon, scripture and magnificent music; like the 20 or so outreach programs, both locally and globally, supported by our gifts, and the willing hands that spread God's love and care for all creation, like the dedicated volunteers that work to help others in our Second Saturdays program; like the children who come here regularly to learn that they are a child of God and a member of a family of faith that will love them and care for them throughout their lives; like the volunteers who deliver flowers and a prayer shawl after worship each week to someone hospitalized. You can't put a financial figure on those things in a budget. That's ministry; that's the result of many open hands who give and work together in the name of Christ and by his Spirit.

This year the stewardship committee is asking all of us to earnestly examine the gifts God has placed in our hands and to consider two things: increasing the amount we give financially and becoming involved in one new ministry opportunity throughout the year – a Bible study, an outreach ministry, a concert, a new activity – so that we can be touched anew by God's gracious hand.

You know, folk wisdom says that congregations in transition, like you are between called senior pastors, often experience a down-turn in attendance and worship. We really have not. We are slightly behind budget at this point, but not enough for anyone to lose sleep over. Our attendance has been consistent and steady. Why do you suppose that is? I

think it is because Trinity takes seriously it's faithful commitment to the Gospel. I think it is because you know that the ministry here goes far beyond the personality of any one pastor. I think it is because you know whose hand it is that blesses us and gives us the courage to be proclaimers of grace. I think it is because this faith community knows how to open its hands in witness, giving and service.

Let me see your hands, please. Yes, they look blessed to me; blessed to be a blessing to others.

AMEN.