

# LIVE GENEROUSLY, Changing the Face of Stewardship

In the ancient myths, Jason and the Argonauts joined in a search for the Golden Fleece. Their journey would lead to an encounter with the dreaded Sirens and therefore Orpheus, the mythical father of music, joined the quest. Unlike Odysseus of old who would fill the ears of his crew with wax to prevent them from hearing the alluring call of the Sirens, Jason simply planned to have Orpheus sing a better song. At the heart of our stewardship quest in this 21<sup>st</sup> century is the desire to sing a better song than the melodies of our consumer culture which tempt us toward debt, danger and despair.

That temptation is seen in the vocabulary of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, preferring the phrase “giving back” when referencing matters of sharing, giving, philanthropy and stewardship. What is implied in this expression is a restoration of something to its rightful owner. The giver is called upon to exercise a sense of fairness, not to demonstrate generosity. This propensity to “giving back” creates and supports a life dominated by marketplace transactions rather than a life transformed by a faith-filled relationship with Jesus.

The hard work of stewardship is turning from the transactional behaviors and embracing a life transformed and redeemed by Christ. For many, the term stewardship means the annual tithe or church budget talk. Unfortunately, stewards are frequently viewed as a “resource” rather than as a follower of Jesus. The counterpoint to this trend is captured in that most commonly memorized text, John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (NRSV).

This verse is all about that central Lutheran focus on “grace”. A steward leader might easily substitute the word, “generosity”. Four points meld together in this one sentence to define stewardship and characterize the core value of every steward leader: “generosity”.

1. God loved the world. (Relationship)
2. God gave. (Sharing)
3. God forfeited his only Son (Sacrificial)
4. God’s gift was purposeful (Life-giving)

Generosity, the operative virtue in stewardship is defined by life-giving relationships pared with sacrificial giving. The great narratives in Scripture record God’s work of

generously shaping our relationships and behaviors. We also know that God is very concerned with how followers of Jesus invest generously not only time, talent, and treasure, but also how they engage relationships, power, knowledge, and the environment.

Maybe no other financial stewardship model anchors the individual in a life given to generosity than the first-fruits, percentage giving practice of 10-10-80. Sharing a first fruits gift places God at the center of our life. 10-10-80 financial practices will call us to adjust our financial behaviors by 1% of our income each year, moving toward a balance of Sharing 10% of our income, saving 10% and spending 80%. First-fruits giving (sharing) creates a culture of humility by moving ourselves out of the center and making God the focal point in our life (relational). Because of the size of such a gift, we will need to budget for adjustments (sacrifice) in some areas of our life and in our core values, so that others might discover a changed and saved life, hope and hospitality (life-giving). This model encourages every follower of Jesus to joyously rest in a loving relationship with God, recognize and generously use assets for God's mission, and live generously toward God, family, neighbor and future generations.

Congregations living generously reflect common stewardship themes in their giving-education methods:

Establish generosity as an act of worship. Rooting our giving in worship assures that our relationship with God and the faith community is connected with sacrificial sharing and life-giving purpose. The tendency toward fund raising and transactional stewardship is quickly thwarted through this connection. Even parishioners who share financial gifts electronically will find creative ways to participate in the offering by using check boxes on properly marked offering envelopes and other means of participation.

Concentrate on generosity. People give to congregations for different reasons than why they support secular causes. The cultivation of a generous heart is essential to good stewardship and leads away from the fund raising model. Setting a budget and asking people to make a gift to support that budget is a transactional goal that is fraught with pitfalls. Transactional stewardship frequently: elicits people trying to to define their "fair share", invokes relatively small increases in giving, and diverts energy to the one or two negative reactions people have to a specific proposal.

Write the Joy-filled Vision. Stewards in all generations care that where they give is a strong, focused, future oriented ministry. A clearly articulated and internalized sense of God's mission is key to the creation of a generous culture. The accountability for

God's preferred future strengthens relationships and paves the way for sacrificial giving.

Host a financial stewardship venture four times each year. Providing multiple venues through which the followers of Jesus reflect on their relationship with God, and their generous living behaviors will only strengthen faith and equip the church in cultivating Christ-centered and resilient faith-communities. Using these events to thank the followers of Jesus, interpret God's work, share an account of our stewardship, celebrate the work of our hands, and pray for the dedication of our gifts is an invaluable part of our discipleship.

Base stewardship ventures on a biblical rather than institutional foundation. Preach and teach the biblical principles of generosity, and percentage giving of income. It is difficult for followers of Jesus to see stewardship as an integral part of their life and the life of the Christian community if they cannot understand that living generously is foundational to discipleship. When generosity is not taught, fund raising will become the default model for stewardship.

You will remember the story Jesus told of the rich fool in Luke 12:16-20. After building bigger barns to store his abundant crops God said to the foolish man, "This very night your life is being demanded of you." A closer reading of that story in the Greek text can be translated, "...you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'Foolish man, in this night THEY demand your soul from you.'" "They" are the "ample goods". Recall John 3:16. God did not want the power of "perish" to claim us, so he was generous and shared the power of his love. Generous stewardship characterized by God's relationship with us, sacrificial sharing, and life-giving purpose; claim the soul spared from the strangling hold of financial idolatry. In a culture defined by the Siren songs of consumerism and transactional behavior, generosity is a far better life giving song.

Financial stewardship ventures are opportunities for changing the face of every follower of Jesus to reflect and act on the connection between living generously and living richly toward God.