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NEW SCANDINAVIA

LUTHERAN CHURCH

You've got to be carefully taught"

Lyrics By Oscar Hammerstein II/ Music By Richard Rodgers

Maybe this isn't the best song to quote for my newsletter article but there is truth in the title of this song from the musical "South Pacific". So many things we know and believe to be true are things we have been taught; taught by parents and other relatives, teachers, church leaders, even friends and classmates. Some of the things that we are taught are a benefit to our lives, while others can do a lot of damage. And some things do both, depending on how it is used and how it is perceived.

When I was down in Phoenix for my retreat over the first week of January, one of the speakers I was in conversation with was Rev. Tim Brown, ELCA Director for Congregational Stewardship. I'll be honest, when I heard he was there to talk about stewardship, I immediately cringed. You see, I grew up hearing that stewardship was a bad word. When I was in seminary, my father once asked, "at what point do they teach you how to bilk money out of people?" (and yes, my father actually asked that). My father got upset when pastors mentioned money, in sermons or in simple conversations. Yes, I understand that at one point, pastors would visit people's homes and ask if they would be willing to give more money. I wish that never happened and I'm sure most of the pastors weren't happy about doing it either. While my father may not be the only one who had a reaction to money in church, I can't help but wonder in what ways does the world deceive you in giving/generosity? Has the world taught you that generosity/ stewardship is not beneficial to you (what do you get out of it)? And while money was one of Jesus' most popular topics, you might be surprised to see that I am devoting this article to stewardship, and not simply money.

What's the difference? Stewardship is more than currency. The ELCA defines stewardship as "how we use all that God has entrusted to our care — our time, our talents and our treasures — to love God and our neighbors, both inside and outside of the church walls and our homes." Stewardship comes in many forms, and though my father immediately saw dollar signs at that word, he couldn't grasp the importance of stewarding the gifts he had been given. Below I have listed different kinds of stewardship and what they mean:

- Financial- how we use our pocketbooks
- Voice- how we advocate for our neighbors
- Relationships- how we interact with our neighbors
- Land- how we use property
- Mission wellspring- how we utilize our space/building
- Body- how we steward our health
- Creation- how we care for our world
- Collective body- how we care for our and connect with our community
- Praise- how we connect with God
- Time- how we use our time

- Social media- how we steward our online presence
- Call- how we care for our purpose

(Did you know there were so many ways of stewarding?)

Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:6-7 KJV)

The conversation during my retreat has me asking this one question: Who taught you to be generous? Who taught you “...when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (Matthew 6:3)? For me, it was my mother. I could go down the list above and point out how I saw my mother steward her gifts and her giving beyond the walls of Tanum-Forest Lutheran Church (where I was baptized and confirmed). In fact, when my mother died, my father made the joke, upon seeing her obituary, “no wonder I had to make myself supper so often.” My mother was stewarding her gifts through leadership on school, church, educational, and community boards. She taught her children and grandchildren the importance of caring for creation (and sometimes that included her holding a snake for us to touch or watching the bats flying at dusk). She taught those around her the importance of loving all our neighbors and what it means to speak out for those who don’t have the same gifts that we have been given. I have people, to this day, tell me stories about what my mom gave, through stewarding her gifts, and how it changed them and caused them to want to be generous as well. And she did all these things, reminding me, “that’s just what we do” while she knew that not all people are generous to the world around them. And I, in return, do my best to teach about generosity, not just through my words but my actions as well. The truth is, in the American culture, people need to be taught to be generous. For some cultures, like the indigenous tribes in the US, generosity is part of the culture. It is part of their identity. But I think that as people have gotten richer, generosity has become something that is not talked about or even, for some, not practiced. And what does that say to our neighbors? What are our children learning from that behavior?

Now, knowing that my father would be waiting for “the shoe to drop” on this topic of generosity and stewardship, no, I’m not going to ask you to increase the money you give to church. I mean, if you give more money, I’m not going to make you take it back. If you reach out to more organizations, I won’t be disappointed. I’m just challenging you to look at your practice of stewardship. What does that look like for you? Your budget might be tight, but are there other ways you give, especially when you are not required to give? Are you generous to the point where your left hand doesn’t know what your right hand is doing? How does this make you see your neighbor differently (if it does)? More importantly, how are you teaching others what it means to be generous?

The conversation on stewardship was a beautiful topic at my retreat, and I learned so much more than what I could put in here. And you might be hearing some other bits of info in future sermons. I also didn’t talk about the downside of generosity (and there are a few) but that too might be a good topic for a sermon someday. Either way, God asks of us to be givers and to look at stewarding our gifts in ways that benefit more than the self. And if Jesus talks so much about money/wealth, why don’t we look at it a little closer. Maybe there is something we could learn in hearing what God asks of us. Just maybe.

God’s peace be with you

Pastor Sara

Note the following stories that Jesus tells:

Luke 12:13-21
Matthew 13:22-23
Luke 16:10-13
Matthew 25:31-46
Luke 16: 19-31
Luke 19: 8-10
Luke 18:18-30
Luke 12:21-34
Matthew 5: 23-24