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"Subversive Hospitality and Abundant Generosity"

Text: Mark 6:30-44

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Congregational studies are in concert in speaking of a crisis at the heart of "mainline" Protestant churches. I'm glad this is not the plight of our beloved Mayflower Congregation, far from it, but many "mainlines" have been "sidelined." Too eager for a quick turn-around, many dying or plateaued congregations are ready to grab for any silver bullet. As in most quick-fix, it only treats the symptoms because of inadequate diagnosis, which uses an inadequate tool. As someone said, "If your only tool is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail."

In the face of declining or plateaued congregations, the famous three B's have become the overriding obsession: Bodies, Budget, and Building. When this happens, you may expect the following: evangelism is confused with marketing, worship with entertainment, and hospitality with fellowship. Moreover, stewardship is often reduced to fund-raising or resource generation. When reduced to fund-raising, stewardship efforts often backfire rather than *inspire* or make congregations *aspire*. When *inspire* and *aspire* are absent, congregations no longer *perspire* and, eventually, they *expire*.

Well, expiring or dying is not really what congregations or institutions should be afraid of. Death is a friend of new life. There is no new life without death. But what is to be dreaded is dying without resurrecting to new life.

If so, how then shall we understand stewardship that is life-giving? While stewardship certainly includes fund-raising or resource generation, in its profound sense stewardship is about our participation in the care, nurture, and cultivation of the whole web of life and about orienting our whole being to God in Christ so that we live lives of *deep gratitude*, *subversive hospitality*, and *abundant generosity* in support of the *mission* of the Body of Christ, which is to embody God's act of radical love and extravagant hospitality in a world that often draws circles that constrict and exclude, or that draws the circle that embraces and devours.

To embody and practice stewardship as I have articulated it, demands a major re-orientation on how we see life. Fundamentally, we need to see our life, first and foremost,

as an instance of God's boundless grace. What is the most fitting response to grace, if I may ask?

The most fitting response to grace is no other than gratitude!

The theologian Karl Barth wrote that grace and gratitude are intertwined: grace and gratitude "belong together like heaven and earth. Grace evokes gratitude like the voice of an echo. Gratitude follows grace like thunder [follows] lightning."

Gratitude does so many wonders to us. Gratitude changes the way we see and respond to the world around us. You may have heard of a spiritual teacher who said: "It is not joy that makes us grateful; it is gratitude that makes us joyful" (David Steindl-Rast). Do you want to be joyful? Then live life with the sense of gratitude.

Gratitude can help turn what *we have into enough*. It is a common sickness to feel not having *enough*. I don't have enough. Having the sense of enough is elusive. If it is only in being grateful that we can be joyful; it is only in being grateful that we can acquire the sense of having enough. And, it is only in having the sense of enough that we can find satisfaction.

With gratitude helping us to arrive at the sense of enough and satisfaction, seeds of *abundant generosity* begin to sprout and grow. When we have arrived at the sense of enough, we begin to experience freedom, which is the essence of simplicity.

Simple does not mean simplistic. *True simplicity, wherever it is found, is truly profound*. "Simplicity," says Joan Chittister, "is not frugality of life; it is life unencumbered, life free of the things we own so that they do not own us... Simplicity of life is not really about things at all. Simplicity is about *being able to take them—and to leave them*."

Freedom is the true purpose of simplicity. Only those who are imbued by the spirit of simplicity, which means being *undivided and free*, can respond to God's call or to one's sense of vocation, which happens, following Frederick Buechner, when our deep gladness kiss and embrace with the world's deep needs. And this happens only when we have been freed from the possession of possessions. Stewardship after all, is not simply about having something, but about our ability to hear and respond to the needs of the world.

Only those who have the simplicity of heart or the simplicity of the soul—those who can let go—can participate in God's mission in these changing and challenging

times. Stewards are those who commit themselves to the mission of Christ. Their mission is clear: *to help transform people's lives as they have been transformed by the gospel and power of Christ*. Their mission is clear: to bring down the dividing walls of hostilities, love mercy, walk humbly, and work tirelessly until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness an ever flowing stream.

Ironic, we often talk about stewardship without learning how to connect the dots: the relationship of stewardship to the economic life of our society. After all, the word steward is an economic term. The God we know in Jesus is a political-economist or, more specifically, a steward of the whole inhabited earth. In this household, *God is the steward who brings forth the whole household into being, sustains and liberates it, and brings it to fulfillment*. If we want to know a specific expression of God's economic activity or acts of stewardship, we need to look at Jesus.

Jesus embodied God's stewardship of the whole inhabited earth through his life and ministry of helping midwife the reign of God—the new political-economy of radical love, subversive hospitality, and abundant generosity. The egalitarian meals of Jesus offer both a *minimal* and a *maximal* vision: even when there is little food at the table, *everyone must get their proper share*, as in our text in Mark. If there is a miracle here, it's the *miracle of sharing*. But there is also the maximal vision, which points to the *promise of abundance—a feast that satisfies the needs of all*—a feast in which the sense of having enough is experienced.

Beyond having every one get their proper share, the once hungry crowd found satisfaction, or the sense of having enough. This experience of having the sense of enough is a manifestation of a miraculous shift in perspective from that of the mentality of scarcity to that of the mentality of abundance, and a corresponding shift in reality. Perspective and reality are co-informing and co-shaping each other here: *There is enough when we share; there is enough to share when we share; and there is actually enough to share* because of the abundance of God's earth. Scarcity is false. There is enough to go around. We, our community, is one of the links of God's generosity and our neighbors' needs.

Unfortunately, there were barriers that prevented the realization of this minimal and maximal vision of Jesus during his time, which is also true in our time and place. We cannot respond wholeheartedly and effectively as stewards in our time unless we can

understand clearly and can *name* these barriers boldly. We cannot say that we have understood God *truly* if we have not understood our world *clearly*.

If this is the case, I would like you to journey with me, even briefly, in a critique of our present plight with the use of toilet metaphor. In a study about toilets and human excrement, Slavoj Žižek, a Slovenian philosopher, is said to have observed that in traditional German toilets “the hole into which the shit disappears after we flush is right at the front, so that shit is *first laid out for us to sniff and inspect for traces of illness*. In the typical French toilet, on the contrary, the hole is at the back, i.e., *shit is supposed to disappear as quickly as possible*. The American (Anglo-Saxon) toilet presents a synthesis between these opposites: *the toilet basin is full of water, so that the shit floats in it, visible, but not to be inspected*.”

Let’s follow the German way, *examine our shit as closely as possible for traces of social illness* in our body politic. This, I suggest, should be the task of theology. Besides cultivating active hope, theology should make us realize that we wallowing in deep shit!

While our technology for talking to one another has gone vertical, our ability to listen has gone flat. Our access to information has gone through the roof; our access to joy has remained on the ground. Our capacity to hate—as in the most recent shooting at a Jewish synagogue in Pittsburgh that left 11 people killed and six wounded—has gone meteoric; our capacity for openness and compassion is in the sinkhole. We are in deep mess.

When global wealth soars to an enormous height but leaves many in the squalor and die in abject poverty, without a doubt something is terribly amiss. When the richest country in the world ranks low among the so-called developed countries in Human Development Index, something is terribly wrong.

We have created systems that normalize the practice of individual, but more so with corporate greed. We have created systems that exclude and marginalize.

Something is not right and it is not all right!

Christian stewards are called to make it right, which means righting wrongs: This calls for smashing citadels of greed and walls of divisions in order to draw the circle wide and welcome everyone to the table. Charity is good, but it’s not enough. As Bill Moyers puts it, “charity provides crumbs from the table; justice offers a place at the table.”

It's not an easy task, I know. Violent reaction is to be expected from those whose privileged are being challenged or threatened. As someone said, "When you're accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression."

That's it: those who have been enjoying privilege are starting to feel that they are being oppressed. An article in *Huffington Post* illustrates this point by portraying the reaction of an old man who is used to having a community pool all to himself. When the pool was opened up to everyone in the community, the old man started yelling, screaming, and throwing stuff, "But what about MY right to swim in a pool all by myself?" If I may add, the old man was shouting: "This is unfair; you're trampling on my rights. I deserve to have the pool all by myself."

We have no choice as stewards of God's household, but to press and move on to keep drawing the circle wide, making it more open and porous, and allowing ourselves to be encircled by God's radical and boundless love and abundant generosity. We do not own this circle. We are not the gatekeepers of this circle. It is God's circle, or, more expansively, Life's Circle, which is a much wider circle than we can imagine. Let's call others to join Life's Circle, and, to appropriate the lines of the Zapatistas, work toward a Circle or a World that has a place for many worlds—"Un mundo quepan muchos mundos." This is a World that does not homogenize and whiten other worlds.

Now we have come to understand that, after all, stewardship is really about the whole of our very being. More than management of resources, it is really about our participation with God in birthing a new tomorrow—a new, colourful, just, abundant, and sustainable tomorrow. Our gifts, such as financial resources, are necessary in funding our dreams and commitments; they are necessary in providing feet to our visions and hopes.

Let's walk together with our feet on the ground and with our dreams in the sky to chart the path of our dreamed-for new tomorrow. "*Camenante no hay camino. Se hace camino al andar,*" to use lines of the poet Antonio Machado. Fellow traveler, there is no road. The road is made by walking.

Now let's walk together to make the road, breaking down borders of exclusion and building bridges of connections, until all are incircled by the Circle of Life, of radical love and abundant generosity!

Are you with me?

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