

Stewarding our Life Together
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
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This morning we will have the final installment in our series on the mission and attributes of the church. To review quickly, the Church is created by God's Holy Spirit and is God's mission in the world. Each and every person is gifted uniquely to work for the common good and glorify God. We are God's demonstration plot, a visible manifestation of God's reign as we practice "one anothering" in a multitude of ways. The Church is a little like a spiritual gym, where we learn throughout our lives, maturing into the image and likeness of Christ, who calls us to boldly break boundaries (get uncomfortable) in order to include, offer hospitality and work for justice all.

Whew! What more could there be, really?

How we utilize and care for all of these attributes, all these gifts is stewardship. Simply put, we, the church, are stewards of God's gracious gifts, abundant and multi-dimensional.

As the body of Christ, loving and serving God means caring for and putting to work the resources God provides in a way that honors God. Stewardship is who we are, what we do, all that we say and the ways we serve. It is a public expression of our faith. How we care for the earth, sky and seas, the way we care for the sick, incarcerated, marginalized, the ways we spend our time and treasure, who we welcome, and how we use our building and our stuff - shapes our lives and demonstrates to others our commitment to Christ.

Stewardship was a foundational value of the early church and continues today.

We will read a single verse from the book of 1 Peter, a pastoral letter to the early church. Remember that the first followers of Jesus believed that his return was imminent... the church was being persecuted. The temptation would be to give up or give in to despair, but the author of 1 Peter counsels them to live with hope and continue to keep on.

1 Peter 4:10

¹⁰Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.

We will turn our attention to the familiar story of Zacchaeus, and look at it through the lens of stewardship. How did this man use his resources to be close to Jesus and be transformed by his love?

Luke 19: 1–10

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. ²A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. ³He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, ‘Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.’ ⁶So Zacchaeus hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷All who saw it began to grumble and said, ‘Jesus has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.’ ⁸Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, ‘Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.’ ⁹Then Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of

Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.’
AMEN.

Zacchaeus was one of the most despised men in Jericho. He was the chief tax collector, and not only had he skimmed off the top of those from whom he collected taxes for Rome, he most likely stole from those whom he supervised.

And yet, when he learned that Jesus, whom presumably he had heard much about, was coming through town, something moved him to go and get a better look.

Zacchaeus must have been a bold person, he brazenly stole from others, and he used the boldness to his advantage. Luke doesn’t offer many details here, but people being people, chances are he was recognized and was pushed and shoved by the crowd gathering in anticipation of seeing Jesus. Relegated to the back of the pack, he didn’t give up.

Also, Zacchaeus was short, so he looked around and found a tree to climb. That meant that he was healthy and nimble enough to get up the tree! Thus, he used his healthy body and something that was available to him to get close to Jesus.

Then, when Jesus notices him, Zacchaeus climbs down without hesitation, trusting. Surely, he heard the jibes and taunts of those around him, but focused on Jesus. Zacchaeus had a home, and when Jesus selected him from the crowd, he didn’t hesitate to offer hospitality. He wasn’t worried about the unmade bed or dishes in the sink.

Face to face with Jesus, Zacchaeus comes clean. He confesses that his wealth came from dishonest means, and pledges to give half of his possessions to the poor and restore the funds to those he wronged, going beyond just the letter of the law, four times as much, thus making

amends to those he has hurt even if it means a change to his circumstances.

And Jesus blesses him for it. He tells the crowd, he's one of us! All are welcome in Jesus, where there is always room to change and grow.

You see, Zacchaeus used all the gifts he was given to find his way to Jesus, his bold personality, his agility, his intelligence, his resourcefulness and his home. When the light of Jesus' love and acceptance found its way into his heart, Zacchaeus was transformed, courageous enough to tell the truth about himself and make amends in a way that would bring forgiveness and serve others.

Stewardship isn't a season that rolls around every year, it is a way of life that begins in gratitude for God's grace. What we do with these gracious gifts shapes our life together.

Timmy didn't want to put his money in the offering plate Sunday morning, so his mother decided to use some hurried creative reasoning with him.

"You don't want that money, honey," she whispered in his ear. "Quick! Drop it in the plate. It's tainted!"

Horrified, the little boy obeyed.

After a few seconds he whispered, "But, mommy, why was the money tainted? Was it dirty?"

"Oh, no dear," she replied. "It's not really dirty. It just 'taint yours, and it 'taint mine," she replied. "It's God's."

That's it, really, isn't it? It's all God's. This big, beautiful, joyous, brutal world, our lives, with our dramas and our dreams, our loves and losses, the Church, and her mission and ministry. What a gift that we find ourselves together on this planet at this moment in history, to love and

care and share. To learn and make mistakes and try again. What an opportunity!

God continues to speak to the church in each new generation as we discern bold new ways to care for our world and its people and creatures. Caring for all human lives and the earth looks different today than it did in the past and thank God for that! As we know more, like Zacchaeus, the spirit guides us to live differently.

A couple of examples:

As we emerge from pandemic restrictions, Oak Grove is intentionally moving slowly out of a sense of love and care for the most vulnerable. The ethos and economy of the church is very different than the world's economy. We appreciate your patience, as work out physical space limitations after our flood, vaccination availability for children, seek medical guidance from the MDH and CDC and work with the ministry partners housed here. Opportunities to be together as a church may look a little different in the near future. (Outside worship and 2 summer services!) But God's spirit is in it all. We will continue to be nimble and faithful and are so grateful to all of you!

Like Zacchaeus, the Session has recognized that as a predominantly white congregation, we have had advantages to wealth accrual that were denied to people of color and indigenous people due to colonization and slavery. Because of this, we have recently pledged to surrender a portion of this wealth to a new program in the PCUSA as a way to truly seek forgiveness, restoration, and restore relationships with our indigenous and black and brown siblings.

As a church, we know that our changing climate impacts our food supply, housing, immigration, racial equity, social justice, and the economy. Significant resources of money, time and talent have been

poured into making sure that as a body of Christ we are educating ourselves and community and doing all that we can to save our planet. There is much yet to learn.

In all these examples, and these are but a couple of all the ministry happening here, we are faithfully utilizing our gifts with love and thanksgiving and not acting out of fear or despair. Together, we will discern where God wants to lead us next.

In a couple of minutes, we will come to the Christ's table to be fed with the bread of life and the cup of love. It is a table of thanksgiving, and we feast, knowing that we are sent into the world, empowered by the Spirit to be, as Peter writes, stewards of the manifold grace of God, serving one another with joy. May it be so. AMEN.