

Being Like God's Widow: Reflections on Freedom and the Stewardship of Money

Dear Folks, Our Thursday Theology this week comes from Steve Kuhl, newly elected president of Crossings, Inc. and pastor of Mt. Olive Lutheran Church in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin.

FYI – Ed and Marie are back in St. Louis as of last Wednesday, but Ed is in the hospital as of yesterday. He has cellulitis and is on IV antibiotics to get rid of the infection. He's probably going to be there at least a week. Since Saturday (Nov 6) is his birthday you might think about dropping him a happy birthday/get well e-mail. I know he'd appreciate it.

*Peace and Joy,
Robin*

This fall, we at Mount Olive, like so many congregations, will have our annual stewardship emphasis. While it is true that “stewardship” is not simply a matter of giving to the church or to charities but the practice of being responsible, wise managers of all that God has given us nevertheless, when we speak of “stewardship” here we do mean to emphasize our unique Christian responsibility for being what Paul calls “stewards of God’s mysteries” (1 Cor. 4:1), that mind-boggling gift of salvation won for us by Christ on the cross. As recipients of that mysterious gift, we who receive it by faith are also the ones called and dignified by God to be its stewards, to oversee

its distribution throughout the whole world. And that stewardship does include the giving of ourselves, our time, and our possessions: everything else that we have also received as a gift from God's gracious hand.

Stewardship, therefore, is always a matter of making God-pleasing choices and decisions in light of priorities and pressures that surround us. These choices are never easy, and that goes doubly so for Christians, since we have more to manage: not only the "care," but also the "redemption" of all that God has made. Just look at the difficult choice we have. What is more important for the well-being of the world than "redemption" and the spread of the gospel? Still, God has entrusted to us not only the gospel, but a "whole life" to "care for": all those people and things that pertain to the first article of the Creed, like family and neighbors, work and government. They, too, have need of our selves, our time, and our possessions. So, how do we decide how much of our time, talent, and money for this and how much for that? What kind of stewardship is God-pleasing?

In one sense, the answer is not all that profound. We must painstakingly look at our incomes and our out-goes, set priorities, and prayerfully decide how we will make do with what we have. Undoubtedly, no matter how large or small our purses, we will have to make sacrifices cut here, skimp there, make do somewhere else because the pressures to have this or to do that are unrelenting. There is no easy answer to managing all the responsibilities that accrue to us in life. At root, it takes repentance and faith; it takes crucifying our old selfish self by mounting the cross of Christ in faith. For in the process of making stewardship decisions we will inevitably see that we have made poor decisions in the past, decisions that enslave and limit us in the present.

Still, we Christians can make our soul-searching stewardship

decisions in freedom not financial freedom, but Christian freedom, the freedom that comes through faith in Christ. No matter how great or small our ability to contribute of our time, talent and possessions to the care and redemption of all that God has made, because of faith in Christ we can be assured that that quantity in itself has no bearing on our standing before God. Because God's gift in Christ is free-for-the-believing, so our giving in response to him is the freedom of faith. While that freedom will not reduce our need to cut back, to skimp, to make do, to repent actually, it is likely to heighten that need what it does mean is that with God, the One who counts ultimately, we can always "make ends meet," because God has already made-ends-meet in Christ. Now isn't that freeing?

Note this one biblical example of stewardship and Christian Freedom. (Lk 21:1-4) One day while Jesus was standing outside the temple he noticed all the rich people placing large sums of money into the treasury. Pretty soon a widow also came and placed two mites (two pennies) into the collection. Jesus, St. Luke tells us, could not resist comment: "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she has to live on." (Lk 21:4). Giving out of her poverty sacrifice! Jesus was impressed. But by what all was he impressed? Not the amount given, though it was her all. What was impressive was the freedom out of which she was able to give. . . "out of her poverty." Why. . . she was living as free as the proverbial "birds of the air" (Mt 6:26) that Jesus marveled at in his Sermon on the Mount.

From whence does such freedom come? Throughout Lukes gospel we see that Jesus identifies the source of such freedom as faith (Lk 5:20; 7:9, 50; 8:48; 17:19; 18:42). Not just any faith, especially, not faith in abundance, but faith in God and his Christ, the One who first was free enough to sacrifice all for

us. Because this faith alone receives everything all things from God, this faith alone sets us free to give our all in return. For faith is our all, the giving of our whole self.

Now, when you think of it, doesnt that widow look a lot like us: skimping, cutting back, making do, even repenting. And what's all more, she does it all on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ, who gave his all her, for us? Perhaps not a single person would have traded places with that widow that day. But having heard our Lord's comment, don't you find it rather dignifying – indeed, freeing – being like God's widow? As you contemplate your stewardship decision for giving this year, do it in perfect freedom, do it in faith, do it with your eyes fixed on him who died and rose for you. And let me hazard a prediction. You just might find it enjoyable, too.

Live free, believe.