

Faithful Care: For Self and Others

a sermon

by Dan Griswold

Trinity Reformed Church

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Mark 9:38–50

Psalm 19:7–14

Starting today and going for the next two Sundays, I will be preaching about stewardship.

Oh, goody!

Yeah, I know.

What's with that? This discomfort with talking about church stewardship?

Stewardship sermons can strike the wrong chord with some people. They can annoy. They can aggravate. They sometimes stir up feelings of resentment, or guilt.

Those who preach about stewardship have sometimes (often?) given the impression that the church is too concerned about money, and they have on occasion been tone-deaf to how self-serving it sounds for them to be asking for money.

Maybe another problem is that “stewardship” is one of those words used hardly anywhere but in church circles. It's a “churchy” word, you know, like “disciple,” and “discipleship,” and “worship,” and “fellowship.” And of course “pot-luck dinners.” (Can't forget pot-luck dinners!) Such words are used elsewhere — let's see — anywhere from sometimes to never.

And even in church or among Christians, it might not be clear what “stewardship” means.

So, if you think stewardship is all about money, you'd be in good company.

If you think that it applies only to the budget, or something that we should be guilted into paying attention to once a year, well, I get that.

But really, stewardship is not only about money. It's about a whole lot more:

more than money,
more than obligation,
more than this time of year,
more than the budget.

I believe that what Christian stewardship means can be summed up in two little words: *faithful care*.

When we are being good stewards of what God has given us, we are exercising faithful care.

Whether it be money, or time, or our bodies, or our hearts, God expects us to care for these, and care for them faithfully.

And when it comes to things that truly are not our own, that clearly don't “belong” to us,

things like the natural resources we consume,
like food,
and water,
and air;

things that are not “things” but *people*,

like family
and friends
and even strangers we meet along the way,

these as well God expects us, requires us, commands us, to have faithful care for these, too.



The words of Jesus in the gospel reading this morning, as well as from the psalm we all read together, seem to me to encourage faithful care of a particular sort, with a specific focus. These words call us to faithful care for the self and for others.

But those words of Jesus, wow are they tough.

If your eye, or foot, or hand causes you to stumble, pluck it out, chop it off.

Yikes!

Well, like any good teacher of his day, Jesus would sometimes overstate things to make his point.

Maybe you've had a teacher like that.

Actually, it was kind of a thing in ancient times to *way* overstate things to make a point. Now days, teachers might get in trouble for being so over the top. ("Mommy, mommy, the teacher told me to pluck out my eyeballs!")

But back then, such overstatement was a normal, maybe even expected part of how teachers would powerfully convey their lessons. Jesus would do this, too, like here, in this passage, or another time when he said that if you are really going to love him then you've got to *hate* your parents and siblings.

Maybe teachers are nicer these days.

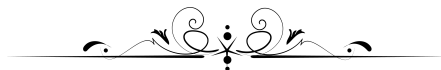
Now *of course* he didn't mean for Christians who mess up actually to be plucking out their eyes and chopping off their feet. If we started taking that literally, we'd have in the church a bunch of half blind people with prosthetic shoes.

But we shouldn't think that with his over-the-top language we have an out, and say "Aw, he's just joking with us." We shouldn't think that we can disregard what he says.

What is he saying?

He's saying that these matters are deadly serious matters, and that they matter. A lot. He's saying that we should take this seriously.

That sounds like a good idea.



What lead to all this was that one day John, one of the disciples, came to Jesus. "Jesus," he said, "there was this guy who was casting out demons in your name. But he wasn't part of our group. So we told him to knock it off."

Jesus responds to this, not by agreeing with John, not by commending him, not by saying "Atta boy!", but by telling *John* to knock it off.

Don't stop the guy, the one who was casting out demons in the name of Jesus yet wasn't among the disciples. Don't put the brakes on his ministry for Jesus that happens to lie outside

of your club. If he is doing good work in my name, Jesus tells John, then it doesn't matter whether or not he is part of your special group. He's doing good, he's doing good for *me*, and this will not go unrewarded.

"He believes in me," Jesus basically says. "That's good enough for me. It's good enough for you, too."

Jesus here highlights the great danger in making fine distinctions between insiders and outsiders, between us and them.

It's a danger because it can destroy the faith of those new to faith.

And it's a danger because it can do great harm to your own soul.

If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.



Things in our country right now are so divided. A rancorous tribalism has taken hold of the minds and the souls of many. There is so much conflict, so much discord, and people are so alienated from each other now.

It's mostly in our politics, but it can be seen in other places as well.

Even in church. Even among Christians, those who claim to have faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Prince of Peace.

Many Christians have become

just as angry,
just as alienated from those who are different,
just as infected with an us-versus-them spirit,
just as suspicious,
just as unwilling to listen,
just as corrupted by tribalism.

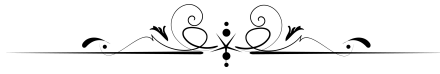
It breaks my heart. It really does.

Back in 1964 Richard Hofstadter had an article in Harper's Magazine titled "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." Well, I think these days we now have in this country (I can't speak about other countries) the *angry style* of Christian faith, which reflects so much the vitriol and divisiveness of our society and politics.

This angry style of Christian faith, this dividing up of Christians according to outlook and opinions, I am absolutely certain that it's pushed away many people, especially young adults. So many people who might have been open to Jesus (and perhaps *were*) have instead heard from the church that if they don't think the right way, speak the right way, vote the right way, look the right way, if they don't wear the right labels, if they don't "belong" in a very narrow and tribal sense of belonging, then they can't really be people of Christian faith. They don't belong here.

They've gotten the message.

And they are answering with their feet.



Jesus says that a main sign of our obedience to him is our faithful care for ourselves and for others.

Those others, he calls them “little ones.” And he means mostly those who are new to the faith. It isn’t merely about chronological age (although it certainly includes those who are few in years). Really, these “little ones” are all who are growing in the faith, whose trust in Christ is in need of nurture.

In a sense, aren’t we all are such “little ones”?

But some of us need more care. And the rest of us must give them that care. To these we have a special responsibility of faithful care.

And so Jesus tells us to care for them:

Don’t make them stumble.

Don’t gang up on them.

Don’t burden them with unreasonable expectations.

Welcome them.

Guide them.

Lift them up when they’ve fallen.

Gently correct them when they err.

Listen to them when they weep,
and listen to them when they rage.

But love them,
love them,
always love them.

To have such faithful care for others, you’ve got to care for yourself. Because it’s those who don’t care for themselves who can’t care for others.

If you’ve not been attentive to your soul,
if you have no awareness of your blessings,
if you are blind to your growing edges,
if you are ignorant of how you obey God
and clueless about how you fail God,

then you not only will be unable to care faithfully for others, you will likely cause them to stumble. You will wound their hearts and harm their faith. And you *will* do the same to yourself.

So Jesus is telling you, and telling me: care for yourself.

Tend to your heart.

Nurture your soul.

Fill it with love.

Discipline it with prayer.

Shape it with scripture.

Look to Jesus Christ,
so his life will guide your life,
his words will direct your words,
and in all things his example will teach you.



My sister's friend, the poet and priest Malcolm Guite, wrote this poem called "Singing Bowl."

*Begin the song exactly where you are,
Remain within the world of which you're made.
Call nothing common in the earth or air,
Accept it all and let it be for good.
Start with the very breath you breathe in now,
This moment's pulse, this rhythm in your blood
And listen to it, ringing soft and low.
Stay with the music, words will come in time.
Slow down your breathing. Keep it deep and slow.
Become an open singing-bowl, whose chime
Is richness rising out of emptiness,
And timelessness resounding into time.
And when the heart is full of quietness
Begin the song exactly where you are.*

(<https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/2013/05/10/>)



Faithful care, the heart of stewardship, starts here: with attention to the condition of your heart and active concern for your sisters and brothers, especially those who are not as far along on the journey of faith as you may be.

All other forms of stewardship follow from this kind.

After all, every form of Christian stewardship flows from a soul that has been blessed by Jesus. And it is *he*

*who has welcomed us and guided us,
who has lifted us up when we've fallen,
and gently corrected us when we've erred.*

It is he who

*listens to us when we weep,
and listens to us when we rage,*

but who loves us, loves us, always, *always* loves us.

*May the words of our mouths
and the meditations of our hearts,
be acceptable in your sight,
O LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer.*