

Scripture: Deuteronomy 24:19-22; John 12:1-8; Acts 4:32-37

Message: So Much Responsibility

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Two weeks ago, in our Sunday morning worship, we were reminded of the generosity of our Creator God. We have so much stuff to share. With readings from Genesis 1 and Matthew 6, we were reminded of how we can trust the providence of God. We don't have to worry, but we can seek first the kingdom rule and presence of God, trusting in his providing care.

From that understanding of God's generosity comes a follow-up principle of stewardship. Stewardship begins with recognizing that our world belongs to God. This means that all the stuff we have, so much stuff to share, is not our own but is entrusted to us from God. Stewardship is being faithful with what God has blessed us with.

Being faithful includes caring for others. Stewardship inspires generosity. We seek to bless others with the blessings we have received. In the reading from Deuteronomy, we see how that principle lived on at the time of harvest. You could leave some grain at the edges of the fields. You didn't need to scrounge for every last olive or grape, because there would be enough.

This was more than kind advice to farmers about how to harvest. It was an expression of God's intention to share with those who did not have land of their own from which to reap a harvest. The leftover grain and olives would be for "the alien, the fatherless and the widow." They would be able to provide for themselves and their families through the generous provision of God. By the landowners leaving some of the harvest, they were acknowledging that this was actually *God's* harvest to be shared with others. They were also expressing their trust that there would be enough for everyone. (Remember the story of Ruth.)

That principle of stewardship of what God provides is also lived out by the earliest Christians in our reading from the book of Acts. They were able to live in community precisely because they were confident that there would be enough to go around. They were responsible with the abundance which they had by sharing it with each other, "to anyone as they had need." They shared generously, recognizing that it was not their own, but a trust from God to use for his purpose and glory. There was enough for everyone.

Stewardship gives us a picture of economic justice. It's not just sharing what we have

with others. It's recognizing that what we have is not our own, but entrusted to us from God. Knowing that God intended that there would be enough for everyone, stewardship is giving what we have to those who have less. We live in a world where there is so much disparity. There are the very rich and the very poor. There are those who live very comfortably, and those who live from pay cheque to pay cheque. And there are those who need assistance, because the pay cheque doesn't cover expenses.

Stewardship of our "stuff," as described in our readings from Deuteronomy and Acts, depends on an assumption of abundance, even having extra. Stewardship is living out the responsibility to use all that we have from God for his intended purpose.

So how does the reading from John 12 fit in? Mary pours an expensive bottle of perfume over Jesus. Was that a responsible use of her "stuff"?

We might read the story from John 12 and think about walking into the Notre Dame cathedral in Paris, or Westminster Abbey in London, England. We might think to ourselves (or say out loud), "What an amazing building. What gorgeous windows. This must have cost so much! Wouldn't that money have been better spent on building a homeless shelter or feeding the poor?"

That's a bit of the reaction to Mary and her expensive perfume. It seems to be a strange story to read with a message about the responsibility to be good stewards of our resources. She seems to waste some expensive perfume. Maybe Judas makes a good point: it could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Would that not have been a more responsible thing to do?

Jesus responds by bringing up the reality of death. Even though this family may have been celebrating the raising of Lazarus (as recorded in John 11), Jesus is aware of his impending death. This theme is reinforced in verse 10, with the mention of the making of plans to kill Jesus. Jesus is highlighting that Mary was using this perfume for the purpose for which it was intended, to honour Jesus, our Saviour, who would give himself for our sins.

He includes an interesting comment: "You will always have the poor with you." These words have often been quoted to suggest that poverty is inevitable. It's as if Jesus is saying, "There will always be poor people; you won't be able to change that. It's something you will simply have to live with. You can't try to solve the problem of poverty, because there will always be poor people. So why bother try."

However, that is most likely *not* what Jesus intended. Those words are a direct quote from a passage in Deuteronomy. Listen to the context of these words as found in Deuteronomy 15:7-11:

“If anyone is poor among your people in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need....Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward those of your people who are poor and needy in your land.”

When we “seek first the kingdom of God,” we are living out this intended principle of sharing with those who have less. We could say that it is God’s desire that there be no poverty. God generously provides the resources that we can share with those in need. Our responsibility is to use those abundant resources wisely, caring for those around us.

If we would use these words of Jesus to justify *not* caring about the poor, we are actually repeating the very sin of Judas himself, who was robbing the poor.

This posture of generosity and open-handedness lines up much more consistently with the rest of Jesus’ life and teachings. Jesus lived out the words of the revolutionary song sung by Mary while Jesus was still in the womb: “He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty” (Luke 1:53).

The responsibility of stewardship is about carrying out God’s plan to ensure that no one is poor. The context of Deuteronomy 15, the sharing of the harvest from Deuteronomy 24, the generosity of the early church, remind us that God has another program for addressing poverty. Rather than simply selling something valuable and donating the money to the poor, the people of God were to be organizing their society to be a place where everyone had enough. What God demands of his followers is justice not charity. The Church continues as the place where everyone is welcome and can have enough as we share God’s resources.

Consider this quote from Martin Luther King Jr.: “A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so

that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that a building which produces beggars needs restructuring."

What are some underlying causes for the need of Food Banks? What are some underlying causes of gun violence? Or gang violence? Or drug overdoses? Or petty crime? We can enact laws or hire more police officers or throw more people in jail for longer sentences. When do we need to look at, and act on, creative ways to change the structure? Can we see the role of the Church as a place to work toward, or to provide, this alternative structure? Can we see the church being a place where people are supported in relationships and care and support, including financial support?

All this talk about stewardship, of responsibility for all the stuff we have, includes a foundation of wisdom. We do not minimize very real concerns about the limits of a stressed environment or an uncertain economy or the complicated reasons for violence. Nor do we go out into the world with a naive optimism.

We confront the injustice around us by moving forward in wisdom, with faith in God's providence. There will be enough for everyone. That's God's intention and his promise. God blesses us and equips us and provides for us in a way that we can also provide for others.

When we remember that we are stewards, we remember that what we have is not our own. All that we have and are is a trust from our Lord and Maker. When we forget that we are stewards then we are really forgetting God.

When we remember our responsibility as stewards, the decisions we make are not done out of selfish motives, but to consider how we honour the Lord with our wealth and love our neighbour as ourselves.

Yes, we have so much responsibility with the blessings, gifts, abilities and treasures God has given us. Thanks be to God.

How is God calling you to live?

Amen.