

While All That Borrows Life From Thee
Psalm 24
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Maybe you know the story of the church that didn't have the reputation for being very generous with their giving. So the very clever leadership of the church decided that it was time to do something drastic in order to teach the congregation the importance of giving. So they contacted an electrician and had the church wired up for a special presentation.

The next Sunday was their Stewardship Sunday, when the church had traditionally taken up pledges from the people. When the moment came, the Pastor stood up and made the following announcement. "From now on instead of putting your pledges in sealed envelopes and turning them into the church office, all pledges will be made publicly during the worship service." Then he said, "So let's get started. All of you who will pledge to give ten dollars a week, please stand up." As soon as he said this he pushed a button that the electrician had installed in the pulpit and it sent a jolt of electricity through all that new wiring, which went straight to into the pews. Immediately about one half of the congregation jumped to their feet. The pastor reached down and adjusted a knob on the podium and then said, "That's pretty good but I think we can do better. All you who will pledge to give twenty dollars a week please stand." A second stronger volt of electricity caused several more people to rise to their feet. This whole process was repeated

several times. Each time the pledge amount was raised along with the voltage. The ushers had to work furiously just to record all of the names and pledges.

After the service the pastor and his staff were busy adding up the totals and congratulating themselves on the great success of the annual stewardship campaign. Their enthusiasm ended abruptly, however, when one of the Deacons opened the door and announced that four church members had been electrocuted because they refused to stand up...

Tonight I too want to give you a shock to the system, but hopefully with less lethal results. In fact, what I have to tell you tonight will bring you to life, to life abundant, to life free from worry, and to a life pleasing to God. Think of it more as a spiritual defibrillator that gets your generous heart beating back at its correct rhythm. That's what they do, those machines. They interrupt the irregular beating of the heart and reset it to how it is supposed to be. And what is this shocking information? Well, it is none other than the way the Psalmist begins Psalm 24, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it." A good, modern day translation might be something like, "Nothing you think is yours is yours. It's all God's." It's shocking in the way that this imaginary conversation was for a man once had with Jesus after getting a glimpse of the kingdom, that pearl of great price:

"I want this pearl. How much does it cost?"
The seller said, "It's too dear, too costly."
"But how much?"

“Well, it’s very expensive.”

“Do you think I could buy it?”

“It costs everything you have -- no more, no less -- so anybody can buy it.”

“I’ll buy it.”

“Well, let’s see what it will cost you. What do you have? Let’s write it down.”

“I have \$10,000 in the bank.”

“Good, \$10,000. What else?”

“I have nothing more. That’s all I have.”

“Have you nothing more?”

“Well, I have some dollars here in my pocket.”

“How many?”

“I’ll see: Thirty, forty, fifty, eighty, one hundred, one hundred twenty -- one hundred twenty dollars.”

“That’s fine. What else do you have?”

“I have nothing else. That’s all.”

“Where do you live?”

“I live in my house.”

“The house, too.”

“Then you mean I must live in the garage?”

“You have you a garage, too? That, too. What else?”

“Do you mean that I must live in my car, then?”

“Have you a car?”

“I have two.”

“Both become mine. Both cars. What else?”

“Well, you have my house, the garage, the cars, the money, everything. What do you mean, ‘What else?’ ”

“Are you alone in the world?”

“No, I have a wife, two children...”

“Your wife and children, too.”

“Too?”

“Yes, everything you have. What else?”

“I have nothing else, I am left alone now.”

“Oh, you too! Everything becomes mine -- wife, children, house, money, cars -- everything. And you too. Now, you can use all those things here but don’t forget they are mine, as you are. When I need any of the things you are using, you must give them to me because now I am the owner.”

Yes, that is the shocking good news of the Gospel, that nothing you own, nothing you have, nothing you cherish, nothing at all, not even your identity, is yours. You are just using it for a while. It has been loaned to you, so to speak, entrusted to you for a little while. The owner, if you want to put it that way, the owner of all that stuff is God. You didn't bring it into this world, and you can't take it with you. It's all God's.

At some level, we probably all know this already. Or at least we can see the logic in it. If God has created the world, it can't really belong to us. We can create neither matter nor energy, those pretty essential elements that go into everything we think is ours. And yet, we don't always live like we are simply the caretakers of that creation. We like to think we can do with it as we please. And we often do just that! But that is not sustainable, neither in terms of our planet nor our spiritual lives. For all the amazing technology and architecture and engineering we've come up with as the human race, we still haven't figured out how to keep people from starving to death, or dying of preventable diseases. Our collective heart still beats irregularly. Our rhythm is not right. That "hill of the Lord," with all of its blessing, is still far away. As hard as we try, when we cling to the idea that all we possess is our own property, all we get are dirtier hands, and more impure hearts that keep us further away from that hill. But that's our destination, that's where our stewardship is headed, that's where God wants us to end up. To get there, however, we might need a new perspective on that hill and how to climb it.

Although we probably need a more radical conversion than a simple change of perspective, I think that is probably where we need to begin, at least for tonight. You see, stewardship is about perspective, about putting everything we have, everything we are, in the divine light. We need a new way of talking about our stuff. And I think the language of borrowing might get us farther than any other vocabulary. We are all borrowers, debtors to the Lord in all the ways that seeker of the pearl of great price discovered in his shocking conversation with Jesus. And not only are we borrowers of our possessions, and our relationships, and our families, but our very lives as well, and our salvations. Now, being a debtor might be a frightening thought when the mortgage is due, or when the credit card bill arrives, but being a debtor in God's economy works a little differently. God doesn't try to collect the same way when we haven't made our "payments." That's why I love so much the last half of the last verse of the last song we will sing tonight, that old classic, "I Sing the Mighty Power of God" by Sir Isaac Watts. Listen to what it says, "While all that borrows life from thee is ever in thy care, and everywhere that we can be, thou God art present there." Yes, we are borrowers, debtors, to a providential God, not a penny-pinching bank.

Occasionally we remember that. There is an old story, a story that goes back at least as far as the seventeenth century, of a beggar upon the way who asked something of an honorable lady: she gave him sixpence, saying, "This is more than ever God gave me." "Oh!" says the beggar, "Madam, you have abundance, and

God has given you all that you have; say not so, good madam.” “Well,” says she, “I speak the truth, for God has not given but lent unto me what I have, that I may bestow it upon such as you are.” Maybe this is where the idea of “paying it forward” comes from.

Maybe it takes looking at it from God’s perspective, if that’s even possible. Have you ever loaned out a book and regretted it later? When the person who promised to return it never did (Annie!)? Or a tool when it came back damaged? Or your car when it came back wrecked? Hopefully you were able to extend some grace to the transgressor, the violator of your property, but it must have hurt that the person to whom you entrusted something valuable did not care for it the way you would. Imagine now God’s grief at what we have done to what was entrusted to us. We get glimpses of that grief in the story of Noah, in the Tower of Babel, in the forty years of wandering in the desert, in the exile of the people of Israel, all the result of when what was placed generously in our hands was carelessly thrown to the ground and trampled. I should imagine that God has learned how to hold creation loosely, maybe by remembering the great and glorious fact that it can be renewed in an instant. But it’s gotta hurt, right?

Maybe it is like losing something, maybe everything, in a fire. All your furniture, photographs, high school yearbooks, you name it, gone in an instant. What do you do with that? Well, I think you let it go or you go crazy. Even though some of the things lost are irreplaceable, life must go on. How often have you seen

victims of house fires on TV giving thanks that they “only” lost their home? We seem to gain more perspective in those moments of loss than in those times of gain. That’s when we learn more keenly what it means to hold things loosely. And holding our possessions and our relationships and our faith loosely, lightly, means that they can be more easily entrusted to God who will take so much better care of them than we will.

There is no formula for changing our perspective on who is the owner and who is the manager, who holds the debt and who makes the payments. But it is always worth reflecting on, and so we take that opportunity every year as a church to apply that divine defibrillator to the irregular beating of our generous hearts. The stewardship to which we are called is not only of the economic resources that make their way into our hands, but indeed we are called to care for the truth, of what Christ has done for the world and in our lives, of the faith we have been given, of the world we have had loaned to us, of the relationships we have been offered. That is true of our individual lives, in our family, and together as the church.

The church may at times be an unreliable steward of what belongs to the owner, but the owner is still trustworthy and just. And as imperfect as we may be at administering God's creation, God still entrusts that responsibility to us. It has not yet been taken from our job description and given to another species. It is ours. As we approach next Sunday and the chance to declare before God what we will

share, let us take that responsibility seriously, holding on loosely to the blessing of the Lord. Amen.