

Faith Mennonite Church  
November 14, 2010  
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Caretakers for God  
*Deuteronomy 8:6-18; Matthew 21:33-43; Matthew 6:19-21*

When we moved to St. Paul 10 years ago, we spent our first month house sitting for Joan Kreider. It was a perfect arrangement. Her family was taking a month-long trip to Alaska just as we were closing on the purchase of an old house that needed at least a month's worth of work before it was ready to be occupied. We cooked and slept at Joan's house and spent our days rehabbing our new place. When her family returned home we returned the keys and moved to our house on Aurora Avenue even though our kitchen still lacked a sink and there would be ongoing work during the following 10 years (and counting!).

Now there could have been a different end to this story. We could have become so comfortable in Joan's house that we were no longer satisfied with the house we had chosen to buy. Her house had a more spacious kitchen, a finished basement that our boys enjoyed, and two bathrooms, where our house just had one bathroom and no family or recreation room space. We could have changed all the locks and not let Joan's family back in, convinced that since she's a doctor she could probably afford to buy another house. I mean, she did leave us in charge, didn't she?

Obviously it would have been a pretty stupid move on our part: we would have ruined our new relationship of trust with Joan, we would have been served an eviction order, and Gerald might have been disinvented to teach Christian ethics at the University of St. Thomas! We would have turned a lovely gift into a greedy nightmare.

As preposterous as this sounds, we know that it's not so far from reality. Think Tom Petters, Bernie Madoff, people who took money from trusted associates and used it for their own opulent living. Moses warned the people of Israel as they were about to enter the Promised Land, after 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, that it could happen to them. They might forget that the land, the new-found, joyful abundance was a gift, a trust from God, and not simply a play thing to squander and use as they pleased. Jesus, too, must surely have witnessed this reality for he told repeated stories about unfaithful stewards, who, in effect, changed the locks and tried to claim property that was not their own. Jesus' steward stories seem to have a two-fold application: they are at once about being managers of our physical and financial resources as well as our spiritual inheritance. Jesus was equally outraged with people who did not share their wealth of property and with those, like the religious leaders, who hoarded their spiritual treasures by devising endless rules about who was in and out of the faith community.

In both of these arenas the basic issue is: who is the real owner of what we have? If we proclaim that the owner is God, then we must take seriously our role as God's managers. Considering that role helps guide our use of the resources at our disposal and it also shapes our very relationship with God. Faithful stewards will manage well and will enjoy a relationship of ever deepening trust and love with our Creator.

Being faithful stewards then is much more than deciding how much money to give to the church. Mark Allen Powell, author of *Giving to God: The Bible's Good News about Living a Generous Life*, breaks faithful living as God's managers into four aspects: 1) how we *acquire* our

money, 2) how we *regard* our money, 3) how we *manage* our money and finally, 4) how we *spend* our money.

How we acquire our money in the complex economy in which we live is no small or easy matter. The Bible calls us to be honest and truthful in all our dealings and not to seek personal gain in ways that bring harm to others. Sometimes we find ourselves working for good in an overall system that is broken. This goes for those who work in healthcare, or perhaps in banks that were involved in questionable mortgage practices. There was a period of time in my life when I was paid through a grant from the Coca-Cola Company. I have had conversations with persons here at FMC and with friends outside our community, who struggle with these ambiguities and continue to work at being a positive influence in imperfect settings.

The Bible's deepest concern about the acquisition of money seems to be that it not "become an end in itself...[A]n accumulation of material things must not dominate one's life to the extent that one does not enjoy or even use what one has"<sup>1</sup>—whether that is a little or a lot. Living in the most affluent, consumer economy in the world, we are constantly tempted to measure our happiness by what we have, and to make acquisition the ultimate goal. But the wisdom of Scripture, recorded in the book of Proverbs, reminds us:

Better is a little with the fear of the Lord, than great treasure and trouble with it.

Better is a dinner of vegetables where love is, than a fatted ox and hatred with it.

Better is a little with righteousness, than large income with injustice.

Better to be poor and walk in integrity, than to be crooked in one's ways even though rich. (15:16-17; 16:8; 28:6)

How we *regard* money is often as complicated as how we acquire it. We've heard Jesus' sayings "you cannot serve two masters" and "where your treasure is there will your heart be also." We're sometimes embarrassed by or critical of abundance. But Moses' words to the children of Israel assumed that God *will* make God's people prosper. They were about to inhabit a land of plenty. Moses called them to be thankful and to remember that what they were about to receive was a gift. Expressing gratitude to God, at mealtime and each time we get paid, helps us remember where our gifts come from. Expressing gratitude also builds contentment and trust that God will continue to provide for our needs.

As faithful stewards we are called to *manage* our resources in ways that honor God. One of the first steps in managing anything is to know what we have and then to plan how we will use it. Learning to create and follow a budget is one of the most basic and helpful tools in faithful stewardship. Sadly, many people never learn this basic skill. When I was a graduate student in the 80s I was a teaching assistant for a class in Personal Finance. College students often took it as an elective, expecting an easy A. Many were disappointed that it was more difficult than they anticipated. Each term we had students record all their spending for several weeks and then create a budget to follow for a month. Most were surprised by a) how much they actually spent on various things and b) how differently they could spend if they were thoughtful about the process.

That brings us to the final act of faithful stewardship: the *spending*. As faithful stewards we are not just concerned about how much we give to the church and to other charities but how we spend and use all of our resources. John Westerhoff, the author of *Grateful and Generous Hearts*, writes:

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Allan Powell, *Giving to God: The Bible's Good News about Living a Generous Life*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2006, p. 83.

Stewardship is about giving up the love of possessing and practicing a life of simplicity; of developing the habit of giving things away; of buying only what is absolutely necessary; of rejecting anything to which we are becoming addicted; of learning to enjoy things without owning them; of developing a greater appreciation of and respect for the natural order; of rejecting anything that will result in an injustice for others.<sup>2</sup>

Someone who exemplified this kind of stewardship in life was John Wesley, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century co-founder, with his brother Charles, of the Methodist movement in England. In his first job, he is reported to have earned thirty pounds. He kept 28 and gave 2 pounds away. Later, when his salary doubled, he continued to keep 28 and gave the rest away. Eventually he earned 120 pounds but continued to live on 28, giving away the rest. Wesley's motto regarding finances was, "Gain all you can, save all you can, and give all you can."<sup>3</sup> He evidently did just that, giving away £30,000 during his life. His giving supported aid societies, health care services, schools, orphanages, and chapels.<sup>4</sup>

We each have unique gifts and callings. We will not all acquire, manage, save, give and spend in exactly the same way. But let us commit ourselves to be grateful, mindful managers. Let us trust God, the bountiful creator, to meet our needs. May our acts of stewardship—being God's managers—shape us into faithful followers of Jesus.

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<sup>2</sup> John Westerhoff, *Grateful and Generous Hearts*. Atlanta: St. Luke's 1997, pp. 33-34.

<sup>3</sup> Powell, *op.cit.*, p. 168.

<sup>4</sup> "John Wesley: Personality and Activities," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Wesley](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Wesley), Nov. 13, 2010.