

Managing Pigs for God
Acts 4:31-35
Faith Mennonite Church
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(Intro story)

Today's text is the second of two key texts in Acts that describe the common life of believers in the early church. The first comes in Acts 2:41-47, and it discusses several key spiritual practices:

- Breaking of bread.
- Praying
- And generosity, as they sold their possessions and goods and distributed the proceeds.

Today's text is similar, but it focuses on sharing property. In 4:31, the scripture says the people who were gathered together "were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness."

And they acted:

- Verse 32 says they were of one heart and that "no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common."
- Verse 34 says, "There was not a needy person among them, for as many owned land or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold." They sold the land or houses, they brought the money to the gathered group, they offered it for the good of the gathered group, and the leaders distributed the money to others as it was needed.

These two texts form the basis for many Christian groups who have committed to sharing everything and having everything in common. Scholars will debate whether these texts are "descriptive" or "prescriptive." That is, do the texts *describe* the way that a particular group of Christians chose to live, or do they *prescribe* a way of life for us today?

Most scholars consider the texts *descriptive*, because there is no specific instruction toward shared property and because there are many other examples of private ownership in the scripture, including in the New Testament.

And, these scholars sometimes say, even if common sharing, or mutual aid, was practiced then, it's really not practical today. In our world of:

- 15- and 30-year mortgages,
- and Roth IRAs, and 401ks,
- and itemized and standard deductions,
- and joint tenants with rights of survivorship, and all that other legal mumbo-jumbo,

it's just not practical for "everything we own to be held in common."

Of course, this "it's not practical for today" argument is also how people argue that the Sermon on the Mount is just an ideal. It was great back then, but it's not practical for today.

But we as Anabaptists have chosen to take a different view of Matthew 5-7 and other scriptures. We think scripture *is* important for today. The Sermon on the Mount *is* practical. It's tough, but it's also our guiding document for discipleship. It's what we live by. In the words of retired Everence stewardship theologian Lynn Miller, it's where we boil down life to two statements: "Jesus meant what he said. And he was talking to me." Jesus meant what he said. And he was talking to us. That's Lynn's definition of stewardship, and it's a good one.

As a result, we as Anabaptists see the whole of scripture, including this passage in Acts, as a model for our life. In that sense, these scriptures are very *prescriptive* – they prescribe a model for our time.

And this notion of sharing in Acts 2 and 4 was at the heart of the Anabaptist movement when it began many years ago. From its very beginning, this practice we sometimes call "mutual aid" was important. I'm here representing an organization that began in 1945 as Mennonite Mutual Aid, but "as early as 1557, candidates for church membership were asked if they were prepared to give of their goods for the benefit of others (Christian or not) in need."¹

In practice, mutual aid has played itself out in many ways over the years, even over the last 100 years, from the development of organizations like MMA in the 1940s to shared purse

¹ Glen A. Roth and Glenn M. Lehman, *An Instrument of God's Grace: The Story of Sharing Programs/Brotherly Aid* (Morgantown Pa.: Masthof Press, 1995), x-xi.

intentional communities like Reba Place and Plow Creek in Illinois. Groups like the Hutterites have always practiced, and still do practice, shared ownership in their communities.

So if this notion of mutual aid in community has always been a center piece in our commitment to each other, I would also suggest this commitment to mutual aid in community is at the center of how we consider financial stewardship as well. Here are four guiding statements I use to think about financial stewardship:

First, ***everything was created by God, and everything belongs to God.*** In the Bible's very first verse, we read that "In the Beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." Psalm 24 says that "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it." Everything – earth, sky, sun, moon, from the cement in the skyscrapers downtown to the magnificent Grand Canyon, was created by God.

And it all belongs to God. I recently came across a challenging statement. A man was giving a lecture about financial stewardship, and he kept describing "giving back to God." "We must give ourselves back to God." "We must give our money back to God." How many times have you heard the offering described as our opportunity to "give back to God"?

But a listener came forward afterward and challenged his understanding of stewardship. And I think the listener was right. So I decided right then and there that I am no longer going to *give back* to God. I am no longer going to *give my offering to the ministry of God* at (Waterford Mennonite Church.)

Now when is the last time you heard a preacher say *that*?

The listener's point was this. To "give" implies a transfer in ownership. When I *give* a gift to my son, it's no longer mine. It's his. I might have wishes about how he uses it. I may hope he will use it responsibly, but ultimately the item is his.

But *God doesn't transfer ownership* of anything to us. The stuff we care for? It's God's. The talents, the time, the world we live in? They are God's. And yes, the money coming into and out of our lives? It is God's as well.

So, yes, I do place a check in the offering plate when I worship. But that money is not ultimately a *gift* that I am *giving back* to God. That money is a recognition that God owns everything in my life, and that I want to acknowledge that ownership.

Now, I confess -- it is almost impossible to talk stewardship without the word "give." After all, the very first verse that many of us learned was "For God so loved that world, that he GAVE." Generosity is at the heart of who God is, so I use the word "Give," but I always try to do it with the awareness that God created everything, and that everything belongs to God.

So, on Sunday morning, we put our offerings in the plate. Which leads to our second stewardship point: ***Stewardship is an act of worship.***

In Genesis, when Noah got out of the boat, the very first thing he did was build an altar and make a sacrifice to God. In chapter 8, he takes one pair of each of the seven pairs of clean animals he'd taken into the boat, and he makes a sacrificial offering to God.

Now, I'm no expert in manufacturing, but it seems to me that if you are starting with a limited inventory of raw materials and you tell them to "be fruitful and multiply," the prudent thing is NOT to destroy 14.2857 percent of your raw materials. But that's what Noah does. He's like many others in the scripture. Through all of scripture, the most common act of worship that is identified is *not* to sing. It's *not* to listen to a sermon. No, the most common act of worship in scripture is the offering, the sacrifice. The most common thing people do when they worship the Lord is to make a good and acceptable gift to God.

And then sometimes we jokingly refer to that gift as the "10 percent." And then we argue about the tithe and whether we're still required to give 10 percent.

- And is that 10 percent on the gross or on the net?
- And does it apply just to employment income, or should we also take into account our investment income?
- And finally, do we also need to worry about that pesky tithe when we make our estate plan and distribute money to our kids, kids who are often adults in their own right?

Oops. I missed one...

- Does that tithe apply just to the money that I give to (Waterford), or can I count the money that I give to Mennonite Mission Network or my Mennonite College or the local thrift store as part of my tithe?
- Oh, and if I pay \$30 for the MYF fundraiser meal, can I count the \$20 that is beyond the goods and services that I received? After all, it's an itemized deduction on my taxes!

But too often, these arguments are just masks for asking, “How can I put as little in the plate as possible?” In reality, the tithe is just one of at least six different Biblical models for giving. Instead of asking, “How much should I give to God,” perhaps we should be asking, “How much should I keep?”

But in whatever terms, the amount we give, or the “10 percent,” is the part that we most frequently talk about in church. But we are also called by God to manage the “90 percent.” Our third stewardship principle is that ***We are called by God to be managers of the resources that we are entrusted with.***

The Bible is full of discussion about managing money in faithful ways. We are quick to point to how God cares for the poor, but Henri Nouwen has said, that “Sometimes our concern for the poor has carried with it a prejudice against the rich.”² God cares for the poor, but he cares for the rich as well. The appropriate life when managing money is a life of balance.

One passage that describes this balance is in Proverbs 30:8-9, which says:

...give me neither poverty nor riches;
feed me with the food that I need,
[you might say, “give us this day our daily bread”]
or I shall be full, and deny you, and say, “Who is the LORD?”
or I shall be poor, and steal, and profane the name of my God.

There are indeed many warnings in the Bible about the perils of riches, but there are cautions about the poor as well. In all those, the consistent message is that we are called to be stewards of the resources we have been entrusted with. The word “steward” comes from the words “sty ward.” A “sty ward” was commissioned with managing the resources of the owner, of being the “ward” of the pigsty. The “sty ward” didn’t own the pigs, but was commissioned by the owner to manage the pigs well. We don’t own the money we have, but we are commissioned by the owner, by God, to manage it well.

² Henri J.M. Nouwen, *A Spirituality of Fundraising* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2010), 36.

Which brings us to our fourth principle for a life of stewardship. ***Stewardship is, at its core, a spiritual practice***, one that draws us *closer* to God and one that makes us more *like* God.

A great passage for thinking of stewardship as a spiritual practice is 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, where Paul encourages the Corinthian church to be like the churches in Macedonia. “For during a severe ordeal of affliction,” Paul writes, “their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.” Paul goes on, “They voluntarily gave according to their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints.” And a verse later Paul says: “Now as you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in your love for us – so we want you to excel in this generous undertaking.”

When I mentioned earlier that the tithe is one of several giving models named in the Bible, I could have pointed here, where the Corinthians are encouraged to give *cheerfully*, in a *planned* way, with *joy*. “God loves a cheerful giver,” it says in Acts 9:7.

As I conclude, I’ll tell a story from my own life about stewardship as a spiritual practice. When Bonnie and I committed to tithing a long time ago, we didn’t do it cheerfully. We did it out of obligation. We were just “checking the box.” We respected some generous people in our congregation who seemed to have their lives together, and they tithed, so we figured we’d better try it too.

But after we tithed for a while, I had a medical procedure. I describe it as a voluntary surgery. It wasn’t in a hospital – it was more “outpatient.” I would say that I was living life tight-fisted, in the desire to accumulate as much as I could so I could early. This voluntary surgery took place when I allowed God to pry open my hands, to pry apart my fingers, to help me live with open hands. A crucial part of the surgery was also when I allowed God to pry open the button on back pocket and free my wallet for a life of generosity.

Sometimes with spiritual practices and spiritual habits, we have this mindset that we can’t begin to *act* on something until we *believe* in it. As thoughtful, cerebral, Christians, we tell ourselves that we have to “*believe* ourselves into new ways of acting.” But sometimes it’s just as helpful to “*act* ourselves into new ways of believing.”

So in that surgery, in that set of actions, I was transformed. When I chose the *act* of tithing, I eventually learned to *believe* in being generous with my money. And when I learned to be generous with my money, I learned to be generous with my time, my relationships, my “heart,

mind, body, and soul.” And honestly, when I discovered the joy that comes with a life of generosity, the joy that comes from managing God’s money well, the joy of being a steward I was able to expand my financial giving well beyond what I ever thought was possible.

I said earlier that the concept of mutual aid is at the center of our stewardship. I also believe that mutual aid is best done in the context of community. And community, this notion of having all things in common, this notion of mutual aid, shows up in each of these stewardship principles.

- Practicing mutual aid in community helps us understand that ***all things come from God and that God is the owner of everything.***
- It helps us understand that a life of ***stewardship is a life of worship toward God.***
- It helps us realize that ***we are called to manage all of the resources that we have been entrusted with.***
- And finally, practicing mutual aid in community is a ***spiritual practice that forms us more fully into the likeness and image of God...***

...the God who created us;

the God who through the life and death of Jesus on the cross redeemed us;

and the God who by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in our life,

continues to sustain us for God’s mission and ministry throughout each and every day.

Thanks be to God, for this indescribable gift. Amen.