

Sermon for November 13, 2016 "Stewardship 101"

Genesis 2:4-9, 15-17

Long, long ago: before there were microwave ovens and laptop computers, before there were 401K's, junk bonds, or money market accounts, before there were cars and houses, there was nothing. Now, when I say nothing, I mean nothing. When most people hear "nothing" they think of a desert or wilderness. But that would be something. I mean there was nothing but dirt and a mist rising from the ground.

And God reached down and grabbed up a handful of red clay. Then God threw the clay on a potter's wheel and began shaping something. Finally, when God finished shaping it, he looked at it and sighed a deep sigh and breathed on it and it came to life. And God clapped his hands and said, "*Ha adam*" which roughly translated is "Dusty, my man!"

God realized that Dusty, or Adam as we know him, needed a place to live. So, God planted a garden on the earth. The garden included every kind of plant that God could create: mosses and herb, fruits and vegetables, and flowers of every sort and color. There was even a tree of forbidden fruit, but that is the subject of another story.

Then God said, "Dusty needs something to do: a way to make a living." So, God handed Dusty a shovel and a rake and said, "You are my chief gardener. You will tend my garden and care for all the plants I have created. And you may eat of the fruits and the vegetables except for that one I told you not to." And the world was perfect and life was wonderful - at least for a while.

All Christian doctrine has its roots in the book of Genesis. That is why when I wanted to talk about stewardship in preparation for our pledge Sunday; I started with the second chapter of Genesis. We talk about "Stewardship" in the church but most Christians don't know what we mean. When people hear the word "Stewardship" they think about giving money or more specifically tithing, or giving a tenth of one's income. Now that is all part of stewardship, but stewardship is much more. In a sense tithing is a symptom of good stewardship not stewardship itself.

Put simply stewardship is the belief that all we have came from God and belongs to God and we are merely caretakers or stewards of God's things. Dusty, better known to us as Adam, didn't own the Garden of Eden. It was created by God for Adam to live in, but it was still God's. Adam was merely its caretakers. He was supposed to tend the garden, but he was also free to take whatever he needed from it.

Stewardship is more than just a concept. It is more like a state of mind. Good stewardship is a discipline. It is not achieved over night but one grows to it by steps.

The first step toward good stewardship is to acknowledge that everything belongs to God. In other words, we have to surrender all claims of ownership. For instance, most of you came from homes this morning and drove to church in cars. That house and that car don't belong to you. You might say, "Yup preacher they belong to the bank, I just make the payments." But even when you have that loan paid, it's still not yours. You

might have some cash in your wallet or pocketbook. It's not yours either. You might have a checkbook. The money in that account isn't yours. That is a radical paradigm shift for most people.

The second step to good stewardship is to recognize that we have been given the privilege of using and caring for God's things. If we stop before this step, then we would all have to take a vow of poverty. But God has all this stuff. We look around and there are neighborhoods full of houses. Look out in the parking lot. A lot full of cars! Feel in your pockets: change! God can't just leave us all homeless and penniless. So, God let us use God's stuff. We drive God's cars and use God's money to feed our families and live in God's houses.

They are ours to use, but they belong to God and we are supposed to take care of them. So, good or bad stewardship is a function of how we use and care for all the things God lets us use. How do we use our cars and houses and money and time? If we use it in ways that honors God: meaning if we support God's work and do God's will, if we use them to love God and love our neighbor, then we are good stewards. If more people made this paradigm shift maybe there would not be so many people hungry and homeless because we would all realize that God has plenty of food and homes to go around.

There are several outgrowths of this. One is how we treat the environment. We, as Adam's descendants, live in this garden we call the Earth. It belongs to God and God lets us live here. We have the power to do whatever we want to with it. We are capable of polluting it or preserving it. Some people call this environmentalism, but I call it Environmental Stewardship.

Another outgrowth is how we use our income. This is where tithing, or giving a tenth of your income to the Lord, comes in. You notice good stewardship comes first and then tithing is an outgrowth of it. If I gave you ten dollars to hold for me and I say that you can use it as you need. Then I come to you and say, "Can I have one back?" It would be rude for you to say "No!" After all I gave you ten and you are still keeping nine.

For Christians tithing is a standard, an ideal, not a law. It is a way of expressing our devotion to God. God freely gives love and grace to all whether they tithe or not. And for some people it may be hard to suddenly give 10%. Especially those who have recently experienced an economic setback. But it can be a goal to work toward, and beyond. If the amount you have been giving is only 5% then see if you can move up to 6 %.

But let's not forget Dusty, uh Adam. He is a model for God's plan for our place in this world. God made each of us from the dust of the earth and breathed into us the breath of life. In fact, the Hebrew word "*adam*" or human is closely related to the word "*adamah*" or earth; hence the translated name "Dusty." God has placed us in a garden so we could live and grow. Sure, our garden is different from Adam's. We have some of the same things: flowers and fruits and vegetables, even some forbidden fruit. But we also have microwaves and laptops and cars and houses.

God lets us use these things. But the bottom line is that it's all God's. We are only the caretakers of God's possessions. And the earlier we acknowledge that then the easier tithing and stewardship and all of life will be.