

Stewards

*Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
Celebration Fellowship, Ionia, Michigan
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Scripture: *Luke 12:42-48*

Sermon

The subject of tonight's sermon is stewardship. Stewardship is our human responsibility to take care of everything God has entrusted to us. It's a great big deal; it really is. Just listen to what Scripture says.

The Bible begins at Genesis 1:1 by saying, "God created the heavens and the earth." That simple statement stakes a claim, God's claim, to the entire universe. Psalm 24 makes the same point, but with a narrower focus. It says, "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it." So nothing in this world belongs to us, not a single square inch. No; the world belongs to God. And that is the starting point of stewardship.

NOW, DON'T GET HUNG UP on other biblical passages. I mean Genesis 1:26, Psalm 8:5-8, and Psalm 115:16. Yes; those passages say that God gave the earth to human beings and that human beings are in charge around here. But those passages don't stand alone. Because there is also Genesis 2:15, which says, "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to take care of it."

That verse gets to the heart of stewardship. Stewardship is not about being in charge; stewardship is about being responsible. If I'm in charge, then what I think matters and what I say goes. But if I'm responsible, then every thought and every plan and every order of mine is going to have a prayer attached to it: "Nevertheless, not my will but your will be done, O Lord."

That's what responsibility looks like. That's what stewardship looks like. And that's whether I'm an individual, a family, a school, a hospital, a government, or a multinational corporation.

NOW, I'M GOING TO BE HONEST WITH YOU. When I think of stewardship, I tend to get angry. And I'm talking Lewis Black-level angry. I get angry because we human beings are crummy stewards. I get angry because we act like we own the place.

Think about Michigan, Michigan with all its wonderful, God-given water. We sit in the middle of the greatest store of fresh water in the world. But groundwater near Rock-

ford has been poisoned with PFAS. The city water system in Parchment has been poisoned with PFAS. And fish in the Huron River by Ann Arbor have been poisoned with PFAS.

What's wrong with us?! How can we be so stupid? so selfish? so short-sighted? How can we be so sinful? How can we so completely disregard the basic responsibilities that come with being human? We treat the earth like a giant rental car. And we act as if we can just turn it in after we slash the tires, smash the windows, and trash the upholstery.

IT'S INFURIATING! It makes my blood boil! It makes me want to cheer the master in tonight's parable. Yeah! Give 'im what he's got coming! Cut 'im in pieces! Ruin him like he ruined what belongs to you! I told you, I get angry when I think about stewardship. Just like the master in the parable gets angry.

And he has the right to be angry, doesn't he? It was simple enough and clear enough, what the property manager was supposed to do while the master was away. He was supposed to look after the place. He was supposed to use the master's material resources to look after the master's human resources.

Instead, glutton that he was, the manager squandered those material resources on himself. And he inflicted all kinds of injuries on the master's precious human resources. So, yes, the master is angry, and he has every right to be!

And so do I. I have every right to be angry about crummy stewardship of the earth! Except I'm part of the problem. I know I am. We all are. And we always have been. Is there any help for us? God, help us!

THAT'S WHAT HAPPENS when I think of stewardship. Lewis Black-level anger. And then despair. But last night I remembered something. Last night I remembered that the Gospel is good news. So there has to be good news about stewardship. And there is.

The first part of the good news is the idea of stewardship itself. Just think of it. God makes us his partners in taking care of the wide, wonderful world that he made. Can God look after things on his own? Of course he can! But he chooses a different way. He makes human beings to be coworkers in his great creation project.

HERE'S ONE MISTAKE THAT WE MAKE in our tradition. We imagine that the creation was perfect in the beginning. But if you look at Genesis 1, it doesn't say "perfect." It only says "good." And then it says "very good." But not perfect. Not in the beginning. Perfection would only come over time, over vast ages of time, as all of God's good purposes were accomplished. And we are partners with God in those purposes.

That's why it matters, going back to Genesis 2:15, that the man is placed first of all in a garden. Gardens don't happen naturally. Gardens are planned. Gardens are planted. Gardens are tended. There's pruning in a garden. And there's weeding. And there's mulching and harvesting and composting. And there's always new ground to break, perennials to divide, and decorative touches to add.

Well, the entire human purpose on earth is like gardening. It's about taking something good and making it better. It's about making it more beautiful, more pleasing to the ear, to the eye, to the spirit, more pleasing especially to the Master.

SO GOD PUTS US ON THE EARTH. And the plan is for the earth itself to become a garden: planned, planted, and tended. Some places left wild. Some places made into farms. Some places developed into cities.

And all along the way, we human beings are to remember that the earth is the Lord's and that we are his stewards. All along the way, we are to take care of what doesn't belong to us. And we are to do it for the good pleasure of the One to whom it all belongs, the One to whom we belong.

That's the first part of the good news. The good news is who and what we are by God's design. We are stewards. We are partners with God in his work of making the earth all it's meant to be.

THEN THERE'S THE BAD NEWS, of course, the news that makes me so angry. And I know I'm not the only one. But that's not where the story ends. Not at all.

Yes, stewardship is a great human responsibility. It's the basic human responsibility. And we have failed at it miserably. There's no doubt about that. Forests and oceans and rivers and mountains all bear the scars of our failures. The birds of the air and the fish of the sea and the animals that prowl by day or by night, they all bear wounds of our making.

BUT THEN THERE'S THIS GOOD NEWS. And this is the second part of the good news. Through Jesus Christ, by Word and Spirit, God is gathering a new humanity, a humanity undergoing its own renovation and renewal.

We are being renewed in the image of God. That's what the New Testament says. And if you remember Genesis 1, then you remember that there is a close connection between the image of God and our partnership with God in tending the earth. So if we are being renewed in the image of God, then we, the church of Jesus Christ—we are being re-formed into a people who will lead the way in stewardship.

That's why our scientists and engineers are looking for ways to undo the harm we've done. That's why our public representatives are calling on corporations and communities to clean up their act. That's why all of us are being more careful about how much energy we use, about how much food we waste, and about how many chemicals we use on our lawns and our gardens.

WE ARE LEADING THE WAY, AREN'T WE? I mean, I don't want to have to go all Lewis Black on the church! We've learned our lesson, haven't we? The street we live on belongs to God, and we're treating it that way. Right? The prison yard belongs to God, and we're treating it that way. Right? The car we rent belongs to God, and we're treating it that way. Right?

Even if we can't change the world, let's be sure to do what we can. And let's do it with joy. Because it is not a burden for us to be stewards. No; it's a gift, a gift from the One true God, who calls us to be his partners until the earth is filled with the knowledge of the glory of God. In other words, until the creation is perfect.

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Glory and thanks be to God:
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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