

When the heat of the summer finally dissipates into a *slight* chill, and the end-caps at the grocery stores fill up with pumpkin-spice flavors, and the school year finally settles into somewhat of a rhythm...in our church that is a sure indication that it is Stewardship Season.

Our Stewardship packets went out in the mail this week, and it is our hope that all of our members will prayerfully and joyfully make their financial commitment to support the mission of our church next year by turning in your pledge by the end of October.

This year we are asking for a 5% increase in our pledges over last year to help us match the impact we plan to have in 2025 as we reflect the love of Christ from the center of our city and into the world.

You can make your commitment by mailing your pledge card to the church, dropping it in the offering plate, or by making your pledge online.

In worship – and through preaching – we are going to spend these few weeks of stewardship season in the Psalms around the theme of ownership. I am not one to shy away from asking for or celebrating your generosity (and...to be clear...I am doing both...asking for your generosity and celebrating the amazing ways you have been generous). But, in case you were worried or wondering, you’re not going to hear three “fundraising sermons.”

What I want to do is frame the relationship we have with our “stuff” in the context of the relationship God has with us.

Before I read today’s Scripture, please join me in prayer and then be centered by the choir. Let us pray:

*Holy God – quiet the places in our minds that are filled with noise about all the things we need to do so that in these moments we can simply be. And by your Spirit, open us to hear your word afresh...that it might dwell in us and speak. We ask it in Jesus’ name. Amen.*

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I am reading from Psalm 24. Listen with me for the word of God:

The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it,  
the world, and those who live in it;  
for he has founded it on the seas,  
and established it on the rivers.

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?  
And who shall stand in his holy place?  
Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,  
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,  
and do not swear deceitfully.  
They will receive blessing from the Lord,  
and vindication from the God of their salvation.  
Such is the company of those who seek him,  
who seek the face of the God of Jacob.

Lift up your heads, O gates!  
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.  
Who is the King of glory?  
The Lord, strong and mighty,  
the Lord, mighty in battle.  
Lift up your heads, O gates!  
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.  
Who is this King of glory?  
The Lord of hosts,  
he is the King of glory.

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I would estimate that over the course of my career I have preached about 70 sermons during stewardship season.

Some of those sermons focused on dollars and cents. There are years in a church’s life where – for whatever reason – it helps to be specific about how the generosity of the congregation would actually look in a budget...or for a particular new initiative...or idea.

Some of those sermons focused on the ways stewardship can help us grow in our faith as a spiritual practice. The act of giving is a discipline that we can develop over time...and the benefit far exceeds whatever our giving does to help the church’s bottom line...it helps us learn more about what it means to walk as God’s people.

This year, against a backdrop our state’s “Appalachian Katrina” after Helene, and, this week, Hurricane Milton...against the backdrop of turmoil in the Middle East that feels like it is teetering on the edge of

becoming a global conflict...against the backdrop of all the angst around our upcoming election...and in the midst of the frenetic pace of life that I sense we are all trying to manage – this year, with all that is going on, it is leading me to think about stewardship a little differently. It’s less specific to the pledge cards you received in the mail that will support our church next year.

To put it simply: I think practicing stewardship...that is, practicing generosity...isn’t really about raising money at all – that part is just a nice side-effect. Practicing stewardship is about **perspective**. Practicing generosity helps us remember what is most true: about who God is, and who God loves, and how God is active in the world.

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Occasionally, I manage to keep this kind of perspective.  
But, if I’m being honest, a lot of the time I choose to substitute perspective for control.

I have a feeling – a *pretty good* feeling, based on knowing many of you all for more than a decade – I have a feeling that I am not alone in admitting that I invest a lot of my life and my energy in the pursuit of trying to be in control.

Every Sunday night – after the kids are fed and the dishes are done – Lindsey and I sit down on the couch with phones-in-hand to do our best to control **time** for the upcoming week by talking through the family activity calendar. It can get a bit tedious...but we both breathe a little easier when we leave that meeting knowing we’ve got the week ahead handled.

In my middle age I find I am becoming more fastidious about scheduling my doctor appointments, and cutting down on sugar, and making sure I hit the Peloton or the pavement five times a week to get my cardio. It is my effort to stay in control of my **health**.

I work hard to try to control the **future**...by thinking strategically, and game-playing different scenarios, and making projections.

I probably take too much of a role in working to control my **kids** – steering them in certain paths, giving them what I think are opportunities for success, coaching them on things to avoid.

You know what helps in all of those ways I attempt to be in control (which is far from a complete list, by the way)? Money.

Money helps to buy convenience to better manage our time.

Money helps to give us access to the best medical care possible.  
Money helps to make the plans for the future that we make become a reality.  
Money helps us invest in the opportunities we think our kids need to get ahead.

I think those things go together: money and control.

In my own life, I notice that when I feel like I have both – enough control and enough money – that’s precisely when I find that I most easily *lose perspective* about what is most true...because I fool myself into thinking that I can manage the world on my own.

When I feel like I have enough control and enough money...it’s not that I don’t notice God, or appreciate God...it is just that I don’t feel as **dependent** upon God...because I’ve learned I can make things work by depending on myself.

And then, you can’t. Because life happens. Or hurricanes happen. Or tragedies happen. Or global conflicts happen.

It’s really not too surprising that if we’ve convinced ourselves that we are the ones who can fix it, when the inevitable happens and our world spins out of control it can lead us to feel anxious, and overwhelmed, and hopeless...because we bump up against problems that we just can’t fix.

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This morning’s Psalm speaks right to the heart of those kinds of feelings.

*The earth is the Lord’s and all that is within it.  
The world; and those who live in it.*

The International Space Station orbits about 250 miles above the earth’s surface. It’s a floating science lab in space. First launched in 1998, for the past almost-twenty-four years it has been consistently occupied by astronauts from different countries around the world.

When astronauts arrive at the International Space Station, one of the first things they do, by tradition, is float into and spend some time in the cupola...a room that is comprised of a panorama of bay windows that provide a lookout upon the emerald-green and turquoise earth below.

There are some great videos on YouTube that capture the astronauts feelings about that moment. They describe being in the cupola as the time of transcendence...where they are moved to tears and awe by the

beauty of what they see. Many talk about the power of actually seeing a world without lines that define the different countries. They talk about feeling a sense of connection and belonging to their home planet. They talk about hope.

I listened to and read a lot of these astronaut interviews – none of them mentioned anything about being in control. It was all gratitude and wonder.

The Psalmist didn't have the benefit of a cupola window view – but they already knew the truth:

Beyond the places we can control...

Above the conflicts that occupy our worried minds...

Beneath the oceans of overwhelm...

God has got this world covered.

The world is not ours to own. It is God's.

And through and in spite of all that threatens to undermine the ways this world is supposed to exist – God will love it...and us...all of us...to a place of wholeness.

Because the earth is the Lord's.

And all that is within it.

That is a perspective that we can't control...only one we can recognize, and accept, and appreciate.

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Practicing generosity opens us to this kind of perspective.

Two weeks ago – instead of preaching about stewardship season in their sanctuary – our friends at Black Mountain Presbyterian Church, led by one of our former associate pastors, the Rev. Mary Katherine Robinson, became the embodiment of generosity.

Fresh off the hurricane that turned their town's creeks into rushing rivers – leaving tragedy in its wake, and people stranded in their homes, and a need for immediate assistance with food and water and the basics of life – almost overnight, Black Mountain Presbyterian Church became a community hub.

Sunday school classrooms became food pantries.

The narthex housed baby formula.

The courtyard was filled with bottled water.

Retired clergy in the congregation set up listening stations for first responders coming off their 24 hour shifts so they could process the trauma they had seen.

A member who owns a brewery and restaurant that had a generator began to serve free hot meals with his fellow church members as wait staff.

There wasn't a plan for this, of course.

There was no budget.

It was pure generosity – an impulse to give in the face of need...of time and money and prayer and connection. Expecting nothing in return. Unclear of how long the resources available would last.

Black Mountain Presbyterian's generosity was a witness – it was a witness to God's presence in the midst of despair; it was a witness to other churches – including ours – who responded with our own generosity...connecting us in mission and in purpose to help those in need; it was a witness to what the church is and **can be**...a community of compassion focused on welcoming and serving all.

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It's ironic, isn't it?

That when things feel out of control and overwhelming the thing that helps the most is to give instead of to take? To share instead of to hoard?

But such is a life that is shaped by Christ – who came, not to be served, but to serve. Who poured out his life for our sake. Who made himself vulnerable so that he could love all.

My friends – I know you got a pledge card in the mail for stewardship season. And, yes, I hope you follow up on it.

But more than anything I hope you see that card as an invitation to practice generosity in a way that can re-orient you to find the perspective to remember this: that this is God's world. And God will be faithful. Today and in every tomorrow.

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In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.