

Saint Mark Presbyterian Church
Stewardship Devotional Guide 2020

Grace

Gratitude

Generosity

Members' Reflections on Giving

Why a Devotional Guide on Stewardship?

Stewardship is a spiritual practice; at its heart it is about our relationship with God. Are we listening to God, hearing Christ's words and trying to follow in his footsteps? In particular, are we deepening our trust in God to provide abundantly for us? And out of gratitude for all God has given us, are we giving back a portion of ourselves and our resources to God's work through our church?

This devotional guide was written by our fellow members to deepen our spiritual practice of being a good steward. Before reading the reflections and prayers, ask God to grant you new understanding of the truth of scripture and the peace of Christ to calm your mind and clear all your distractions. To deepen your understanding of each Scripture passage, we suggest you read one selection each Sunday for seven weeks, after each author has spoken about his/her reflection on the Scripture during worship.

We hope the devotional guide will provide you with encouragement, illumination, and resolve to continue to support the work God calls us to do in our community.

The Stewardship Team

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Sunday, September 27

Scripture

2 Corinthians 9:7-8 (NIV)

Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

Reflection

This passage calls us, and I would say challenges us, to view the giving of our gifts as a spiritual act. So often when we think of giving--whether it be our time, money, or energy--we are deciding with our heads alone. Spreadsheets, calculations, and linear thinking drive our decisions about what we can offer to our communities, churches, and even our own friends and families. I admit that I tend to process most decisions this way; what is expedient, practical, safe is nearly always my choice. But that often leads to the brain feeling settled, and the heart feeling uneasy.

Paul's words to the Corinthians remind us that the decision to give is one that should come from the heart. A heart-driven choice to give of talent, funds, sweat, etc. is most pleasing to God. He relishes in the cheerful giver, the one who has graciously given and has done so having been called by the Holy Spirit to share their precious gifts. Giving, after all, is really an expression of gratitude for all that we have been given.

This scripture frees us to do more out of love, and to remind us that our gifts, themselves, *are* love. One of my favorite expressions (scribbled messily on a paper on my nightstand) is "Time is love". How we choose to spend our time, and the other precious, varied gifts we have, is a representation of what we love, value, and cherish.

Prayer

Lord, you have blessed all of us in so many unique, special ways. May you remind us that together we hold a tapestry of gifts to be given freely and cheerfully from a place of warmth and love. We pray that you open our hearts to a place where they may guide us to the gracious and generous giving of all that we have to offer our communities.

-Megan Coval

Sunday, October 4

Scripture

James 1:17

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

Reflection

Forty years ago when I discovered Saint Mark, I felt I had come home. I knew I had found a church that had an outward look. Saint Mark has changed, but only broadened its scope of how and where to give! All these years later I feel blessed and a great sense of gratitude for the fellowship, love, support and continued expansion of the spiritual life I have experienced here.

I grew up in a post depression household where the idea was to save everything and not to waste anything. My parents were both teachers so we never had any extra money. We lived pretty close to the bone. We were the descendants of Scots who, true or not, have the reputation of keeping a tight hold on the purse. Despite that, my father was a humble and generous man and always gave to the church. It was just what he did! He encouraged his children to be generous. My parents sent three children to college without any complaints. My father didn't feel his children should apply for scholarships because they should be reserved for children who really needed them. Granted the tuition was nothing like it is today but neither was his income!

I think there is a feeling in most of us to want to hold onto what we have. But, as we have heard in 2nd Corinthian's "God loves a cheerful giver." I have been given so much, I aspire to be a cheerful giver. I have to admit, I give for selfish reasons too. I give because it makes me feel good! It frees me up! I believe in the old adage you can never be too generous! Just think of how good you feel when you find the perfect gift for someone you love!

I give to Saint Mark with gratitude for my abundant blessings. I give to support the staff, the rich education program to nourish our children and adults, and for the strong sense of mission at home and around the world. I look to Saint Mark for a sense of grounding and direction for what God wants us to do to further His kingdom.

Prayer

God, generous giver of all good things, help us consider all the gifts we are given. Give us a generous heart and the will to give, as we can, to our church and our community! Amen

- June Colilla

Sunday, October 11

Scripture

Matthew 6:19-23

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

Reflection

What a powerful, evocative passage! It is both easy and sickening to picture moths and rats gnawing through a pile of money, rendering all our efforts and schemes to acquire that money meaningless. For me, it also draws a comparison to what happens to our physical bodies after death as we succumb to the forces of decomposition. "You can't take it with you," indeed.

The idea of storing treasures in heaven is much more difficult to imagine. How, exactly? We can't send a check to God, or make a real estate investment in paradise. God does not need our money. Even a gift to the church is ultimately an earthly action, no matter how pure our intentions.

The second half of the passage, however, is much more hopeful. I saw a note that "healthy" is closely related to "generous" here. To me, it means that being generous, and storing up treasures in heaven, is not about the relative futility of what we as humans can accomplish. Instead, being generous is something we can do to be closer to God, to "be full of light." It is an idea of giving for the sake of giving, and I find that comforting.

The most famous part of this, of course, is "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." During this Stewardship season, I know a piece of my heart is with Saint Mark, so I am happy that a piece of my treasure will be here as well. I am also grateful for the opportunity to take the time to reflect on where else my treasure should be "stored" - other philanthropic causes like racial justice and poverty, for my family's security and future, for helping a friend in need during this turbulent time.

Prayer

Lord, thank you for the blessings you have given me. Please grant me the grace to make giving a part of my daily life, and to remember that our happiness lies not with earthly possessions but in you.

- Robert Pergamet

Sunday, October 18

Scripture

Timothy 6:17-19 (New Living Translation)

Teach those who are rich in this world not to be proud and not to trust in their money, which is so unreliable. Their trust should be in God, who richly gives us all we need for our enjoyment.

Tell them to use their money to do good. They should be rich in good works and generous to those in need, always being ready to share with others.

By doing this they will be storing up their treasure as a good foundation for the future so that they may experience true life.

Reflection

These words from the Apostle Paul to Timothy should strike very close to home for many of us at Saint Mark. Many of us have been blessed with some level of financial success in this world. We often recoil at the term “rich” and are uncomfortable considering ourselves as “rich”, but in the context of this passage, Paul is indeed talking to us. It is all too easy to bask in even a modicum of comfort and power. We are proud of our achievements and lose sight that it is by the grace of God that we have all we need and more.

Paul doesn't tell Timothy that we should give away everything and live an austere existence, as that wasn't God's plan for us. God gave us the means to help in this world. Paul tells Timothy to charge the rich with using their means to do good in the world. Be generous with your money, be generous with your time. Improve the life of a less fortunate neighbor. Do these things humbly and not for self-recognition. As we give away our earthly treasures, we store treasures in Heaven.

As Paul was a mentor for Timothy on the subject of giving, my father was my mentor on the subject. We were a middle-class family in a small North Carolina town with a church on every street corner. The church was an integral part of life and family. My father tithed, my father gave his time to the choir, the deacons, and his Sunday school class. He quietly helped family and friends with a kind word, a ride to the doctor's office, or some other selfless act of giving and sharing his own “riches.” His example still guides me today in a complex world where it seems like we don't take care of each other like we used to. I am fortunate to have his example.

Prayer

Father, we are proud, stubborn, and often lose sight of your gifts to us. Compel us to give our riches, our time, and our love. Guide us to do good in this world with the blessings you provided us. Lead us to give cheerfully, to give unselfishly, and to give with a modest heart.

-Tom Freeman

Sunday, October 25

Scripture

Matthew 26:6-13 (NRSV)

Now while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table. But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, "Why this waste? ⁹For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor." But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

Reflection

We are never told precisely how much this ointment costs, but from the disciples' horrified reaction we can be sure it was a lot. We also don't know anything about the woman herself -- whether she was rich, poor, or somewhere in between. Whatever her circumstances, I'm sure she also could have used the ointment in any number of ways. The passage tells us she chose without hesitation to use it for good service.

I'm struck by the varying reactions to her bold act of faith each time I read this story. The disciples heap scorn on the woman for what they believe is a costly misuse of a commodity with a high resale value. Beneath their anger, their worry about how wasteful her decision may have been because the disciples could not foresee the good reasons to use the ointment. By contrast, the woman in our story does not seem worried about what the disciples think of her decision to pour the contents of the entire jar on Jesus's head. Rather, she acted assuredly, likely guided by faith, confident that her gift was being used wisely. The woman's actions in giving -- without worry, without fear, without hesitation -- can serve as a good illustration of how we might approach our own decisions about what and how much to pledge during this stewardship season.

When I start thinking and yes, worrying, about what to pledge to Saint Mark, my thoughts reliably turn to the memory of my father. Aspects of this passage also remind me of my dad's habits. On the surface, my father and the unnamed woman are quite different. My father was frugal: he recycled things before recycling became 'a thing'. During a rebuilding project on our house, my brother the contractor watched in horror as my father pulled used nails from the old boards, hammered them straight again, and reused them. But my frugal father and the unnamed woman were alike in this respect: when it came to giving to the church's service, Dad acted boldly and without hesitation when he wrote his check for our tithe and placed it in our church's little pre-printed envelope. My father didn't complain about what else he could have done with our tithe. He didn't ever worry that he wouldn't earn enough money that month to pay all our bills. Instead, like the woman in the story, he put his commitment to God first, and believed that his gift would be used to glorify God wherever it was needed. Dad's actions from years ago still serve as powerful lesson to me today. And the memory of my father's actions, combined with the story of the unnamed woman's bold gift, will serve as the inspiration for my gift to Saint Mark this year.

Prayer

O God, reach through our unbelief and open our hearts in order that we might give to Saint Mark without hesitation or worry. You assure us that you will supply all of our needs. Let us believe that it will be so. In your spirit we pray. Amen.

- Rachel Kaufmann

Sunday, November 1

Scripture

1 John 3:17-18

How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love not in word or speech but in truth and action.

Reflection

This passage is challenging to read in the 21st century. For many people, obtaining the goods required for survival is far easier than it was for our ancestors. Yet we are also overwhelmed by the needs we encounter and are individually unable to help our brothers and sisters. How then shall we resolve this tension?

Fortunately, God has given us the answer, we come together as the body of Christ (His church) and we are able to do far more than any of us could individually. Each believer has a unique set of gifts, given to them by God. No one person has the time, gifts, and wealth to solve all the problems they encounter, but through the church, we all do. Thus, God calls us to truth and action, if we have enough for ourselves and some besides, we should ask of God: "How can You use this, Lord?"

We can also look to the promise contained implicitly in the first verse: God's love will abide in us as we help those in need. Whether we contribute money, give of our time, or bring our unique gifts to bear, God promises that he will be there with us. I know that in my own life, I have often struggled with the many distractions available in the modern world. When the need seems overwhelming, it can be easy to simply ignore the problems and turn to pleasant media to drive away the sadness of seeing a broken world. But I have found that in my own life, my connection to God and to His church are far more fulfilling than pleasant distractions. Through Saint Mark, I and many other members have been able to make a meaningful impact in the world.

Prayer

Lord, Your gifts are as diverse as Your people, yet we do not always know how to use them. Thank you for being our heavenly father and loving us constantly. In this time of reflection, give us the discernment to know how we can best help those in need.

- Paul Grosser

Sunday, November 8

Scripture

Luke 6:37-38 - 37 (NRSV)

Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; 38 give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.

Reflection

These words from Jesus come from a message that he gave to a large, diverse crowd who had gathered to “hear him and be healed of their diseases” (Luke 6:18). In his commentary on Luke, theologian Joel B. Green characterizes the passage that includes this text as defining “the new conditions of existence in Jesus’ community,” and as unveiling “the general perspectives and practices that will characterize those who participate in this community.” This brings to mind Jesus’ prayers for his followers that we be in the world but not of the world (John 17); as disciples of Christ, we are called to be salt and light in the world, to stand out in a way that points others to Jesus. How are we to do so? As Green concludes in his commentary, Jesus repeatedly directs us in this sermon to “Love your enemies, Do good, and Give (true) gifts.”

I find this to be personally challenging. If I am honest with myself, I often love myself first, act out of my own interests, and give with a mindset of scarcity, rather than one of appreciating the abundance in which I live. Remarkably, although Jesus describes in this sermon a series of impacts on our lives contingent on our own behavior, God has already freely granted us overflowing gifts:

The wonders of creation and our part in it,
Holy Scripture revealing the Lord’s character and will,
the Sacraments,

Jesus’ redeeming death and resurrection, and
the comfort and leading of the Holy Spirit.

In calling us to stand out from the world, God has certainly led by example in ways that bless us even before we act. When I take time to stop and pay attention to the full extent of God’s grace, how can I not want to respond with all I am and all I have?

Prayer

Lord, you have shown us what it means to be extravagant in how we love, act, and give, and you call us to do the same. We pray that you will give us a deep appreciation for the abundant blessings you bring daily to our lives, and that you will incline our hearts in such a way that we act with gratitude and generosity.

—Scott Clark

