

Consecration Sunday

October 6, 2019

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, grace, peace and mercy are yours through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

I am so grateful to be here with you this morning – and for the opportunity that I have had to be a part of welcoming your new Pastor – Pastor Reggie...and for being here for your Consecration Sunday as we all are encouraged to Join the Wonder...what a big day! I don't think we could possibly pack more into a worship service! It is good to be with others within the synod as we are all reminded who we are as followers of Christ – and as we challenge one another in living as generous witnesses to his love and grace in the world. Before I share with you in today's message – I first want to send you greetings from *your* synod Bishop – Bishop Tom Aitken, from the rest of your synod staff – and from the other 131 congregations that you share the gospel with in the Northeastern Minnesota Synod. **Together**, we support important mission and ministry in ways that none of our congregations could ever do on our own – and it's important to say THANK YOU for your partnership...and to continue to encourage First Lutheran Church in your generous living and giving to God's kingdom here on earth.

So I was asked to speak with you today about stewardship – about generosity – and about how important it is to remind one another about how our gifts and abilities and our giving are ways to express who we are as God's very own beloved. Being generous stewards is a way to Join the Wonder!

And as we look at our Scripture for today, I have a question for you... Who will you serve?

I don't know if you get a prickly feeling when asked that question or whether you think about how much it runs against our very grain as humans. Either way, I'll ask it again: who will you serve?

As a culture and species, we tend to prize freedom...and accomplishment...and autonomy – our own rugged independence...we value self-determination...and making our own decisions... and looking out for numero uno...And the list could go on. Which is why, if we slow down and take the question seriously, we'll recognize how much it grates against our deeply held belief and culturally formed sensibilities. Yet perhaps one of the most harmful illusions of our culture is that we are, indeed, free and independent – self-sufficient beings who can live separate

of all bonds of loyalty, devotion, and service. In fact, I shudder to think how much time and energy we expend in service to the idea that we don't have to serve anyone.

Yet this assertion – that you *will always* serve something or someone whether you know it or not – is at the very heart of our reading for today – and in Jesus' teachings, for that matter. – and in fact, serving others is at the very center of First Lutheran's vision statement and your core values.

So I'll ask again: who will you serve – the voices of the culture that say that you can be free...on your own and at any cost - or the voice of Jesus that calls you to find your freedom and, indeed, **your true self**, through service to neighbor.

All of us, made in the image of the triune God, are made to be in relationship - and I think we discover our wholeness only as we join ourselves to the lives of those around us. I think God delights in our relationships at home and school and work and in the community where we live and across this globe - and that we discover our identity as whole people as we see ourselves inextricably linked – “bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh” – with those around us near and far.

Perhaps that's also how we might hear Jesus' description of his life as giving himself “as a ransom for many” – not as Jesus buying us back from God, but instead as paying himself *out* in order to rescue us from our delusion that we are somehow self-sufficient, independent, self-made men and women.

I think this is what is behind today's scripture from Exodus, as well. After God has rescued the Israelites from the Egyptians, Moses and the people sing a song of praise and thanksgiving to God. God made good on the promises...and of all the multiple “gods” small “g” at that time; God is the greatest – in sacredness, worthiness of awe-full contemplation, and in deeds to be marveled at. The people of Israel were dependent on this great marvelous God – for salvation and for life itself! And their song of praise was lifted up for the very reason that they knew that they needed God, just as they needed one another as their bonds of slavery were broken and they could now live in a new freedom.

It's an example and sacrifice validated in resurrection and, for that matter, in our own experience as we give ourselves away in service and love only to discover a depth and quality of life we'd never experienced before.

So I'll ask it again: who will you serve?

It's a good question for a Consecration Sunday when we're focused on stewardship – taking care of what God has given us and responding out of love in gratitude for all that God has done for us and has abundantly given us through *life* itself.

In essence, a steward is not the owner of that which he or she manages, the answer to who will you serve can never be “me”. As followers of Jesus, stewards always live not to *be* served, but to serve.

I Peter 4:10 says it this way, “Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.” You see, stewards exist not for personal enrichment, but to serve one another.

All that we have belongs to God, and so, we are accountable to God to use what God has entrusted to our care consistent with the wishes of God, the owner. That means we are also responsible to our fellow creatures and the creation to use “whatever gift each of you has received” not for our own advantage but for the advantage of others. That's what it means to be a servant. That's what it means to be a steward.

God has claimed each one of us in our baptisms...and through our baptisms, God says to us...”You are mine – nothing you do or don't do will change that...you're precious and beloved.” But God also desires that we accomplish wonderful things – using us to make this world a better place – using us for good...so that all may be fed and clothed and treated with respect and dignity – so that children have a chance at a good education and clean water – so that when disasters happen, we are a part of the response to heal and comfort and make this world whole again...

yes, belonging to God – being God's own precious ones...means that God wants to use us for the good in this world.

As Christians, we are called to be a part of God's movement in the world – God's wonder in the world - and that movement, that wonder, includes community – a community in Christ...which we call the church. Our commitment to God, and that movement and wonder, therefore, means supporting God's work *through* the church.

Stewardship...that word that often makes people cringe... is so much more than just about money. Stewardship means “belonging to God” - all that we are and all that we have comes from God.

In fact, the word *stewardship* implies the care of people, resources, gifts and talents, and the grace of God.

Our stewardship cares for the least, lost and vulnerable – *and* our stewardship cares for each one of us here, too through the ministry that is done in the name of Christ within First Lutheran Church in Aitkin, MN.

Maybe before today, you thought of stewardship as fundraising – as the church’s annual asking for money to pay off the building and to cover your new pastor’s salary. But I hope that you see that it is so much more than that - we’re managers - trustees of talents, gifts, time, treasure, and the culture and values in the society around us. We’re servants together – serving God and one another because God has created us to be in relationship with God – and with one another...and has trusted all of us with the blessings that each of us has been given in our lives.

Your financial gifts to First Lutheran don’t go only to a building or paying for staff and programs...your **gifts go to the work that you are called to do in ministry to this world that God loves so much!** Gifts go to mission projects like the Food Shelf Ministry – the 100 Wells Challenge – Dinner at your door ministry and the Seeds of Hope For Family mission through your endowment – and so much more ...as a partner with the Northeastern MN Synod, your gifts go to Lutheran Campus Ministry at UMD, to the Twin Ports Ministry to Seafarers, to the ELCA Disaster Response and World Hunger Funds – together we educate future seminarians and we assist those in their first few years of service to the church in debt relief. Your gifts go to support our companions in the Lutheran Church in Ingria, Russia, Honduras and South Andra India. They go toward developing new congregations and in the vitality of existing congregations across all 65 synods.

So How Much Do I Give? Tithing is taught in the Old Testament, as the concept of giving God 10% of your increase. The New Testament has a different standard of giving. The Apostle Paul teaches the early church that each person should give as God leads his or her conscience. Through prayerful submission, they are each to determine how much of their income they should *keep*. Now this is a reversal of how most of think about giving. **The question isn’t then “How much of my money should I give?” but “How much of God’s money should I keep?”**

There are biblical teachings to help us with this process. We should take care of our family. There are clear teachings to save and invest our money so we can be prepared to handle any unforeseen challenges in our lives. And there are clear teachings about not being trapped in the prison of stuff. “No one serves two masters,” Jesus tells us. “You will love one and hate the other, be devoted to one and despise the other. No one can serve God and stuff” (My translation).

This is where most of us mess up. We confuse wants and needs. Our needs are very simple. Our wants complicate our lives. This is a tough process and it's the reason most of us never get to this level of discipleship. It's easier to just argue about whether or not we need to give 10%.

But here's the catch. **The standard of giving in the New Testament isn't a tithe, but the cross of Jesus Christ.** "who emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross."

In a bit, you will be asked to fill out your Estimate of Giving Card. I hope that you will challenge yourselves – I pray that your response is one of gratitude to God for all of life – for the blessings which you have received – for naming you and claiming you as a precious Child of God who has been entrusted with this good creation, and the responsibility to serve in ministry that makes a difference to so many.

There is a connection between stewardship and spirituality: generous giving as a spiritual discipline helps us to grow in Christ. May you grow in Christ – may you grow in your generosity – and may you find JOY in Joining the Wonder of our amazing, loving God in your serving and in living your faith!

AMEN

Pastor Amy Odgren

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