

## Scripture Readings:

### Genesis 9: 1-7

<sup>1</sup> Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth. <sup>2</sup> The fear and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air, upon every creature that moves along the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hands. <sup>3</sup> Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything. <sup>4</sup> "But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. <sup>5</sup> And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man. <sup>6</sup> "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man. <sup>7</sup> As for you, be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it."

### Matthew 25: 14-30

<sup>14</sup>"Again," [said Jesus, "the kingdom of heaven] will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. <sup>15</sup>To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. <sup>16</sup>The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. <sup>17</sup>So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. <sup>18</sup>But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. <sup>19</sup>"After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. <sup>20</sup>The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.' <sup>21</sup>"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' <sup>22</sup>"The man with the two talents also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.' <sup>23</sup>"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' <sup>24</sup>"Then the man who had received the one talent came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man,

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harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. <sup>25</sup>So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.' <sup>26</sup>"His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? <sup>27</sup>Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. <sup>28</sup>"Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. <sup>29</sup>For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. <sup>30</sup>And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

### Sermon Text:

This summer we're looking at issues in the Christian faith -- thirteen "touchy topics," and surely there is no touchier topic in most churches than the issue of money. In fact, I'll say more: from the amount of preaching Jesus did about matters of money, it seems that finances were *always* a touchy topic for the church -- and not for the church only. Money and our attitudes toward money are one of the great issues in life, whether you are an ancient land-owner, growing grapes in Galilee, or a 21<sup>st</sup> century software developer. Jesus addressed his preaching to life, and so Jesus' preaching naturally dealt with money.

When I introduced this series, I said that part of the work of Holy Spirit which unfolded in the days following Christ's ascension, had to do with a baptism of the mind. Not only were people's hearts converted and changed, but by the work of the Spirit, guiding them into all truth, they began to develop a Christian mind -- they began to realize a unique *perspective*, which grew out of the gospel, on any question life could present. The *perspective* is much broader than the issues that it answers. Tithing, the topic of my sermon last week, is one *issue* that is debated in the church, but before leaving this topic of money, I thought I would take a step back, and try to describe the overall

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*perspective* which informs the Christian answer to that question and so many others.

In a word, the Christian perspective of matters of money is encapsulated in the term “stewardship.” Being a “steward” means that we are not *owners* of that which God places within our hands, rather we are *entrusted* with all that we have. Holding all the gifts God gives us as a sacred *trust*, involves ideas of care-taking, of accountability, and of being blessed in order to bless. It is a grace-based perspective, so very different from the concept of earning, owning and amassing. The stewardship perspective goes far beyond the matter of our financial assets. We are endowed with time, with talent, with loved ones to nurture, with a corner of God’s creation to tend, with good news to share... the stewardship perspective says that God will demand an accounting from us on all these scores.

Christian songwriter Glen Soderholm, has phrased the essential stewardship question in words that I find so haunting: “*That which God has placed within my hands, has slipped through my fingers like sand. Did I hold it well? The whistle wind won’t tell.*” (If you wish to hear an mp3 of the complete song, go to <http://cdbaby.com/cd/soderholm4> and select “Whistle Wind” under “tracks”). The song was inspired by a couple who had lost their 18 year old daughter. The time was shorter than what they had expected to have. Did they nurture this life which God had lent to them for a season in the best, the most faithful way that they could? This precious gift which God had placed within their hands – did they hold it well? I think we can all sympathise with that cry of a parent’s heart at such a time, yet our children’s lives are only one of the gifts God entrusts to us -- not forever, but for a season – and at the end of the season comes the gathering in and the weighing up. Did we steward them well?

One of the cleverest ads on television at the moment is this one from the Michigan tourist board: “25 000 mornings, give or take, is all we humans get, we spend them on treadmills, we spend them in traffic, and if we get lucky, really lucky, it dawns on us to

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go spend them in a world where a simple sunrise can still be magic, 25 000 mornings. Make sure some of them are pure Michigan....” (view the ad at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9MUrQiMWVvk>). Makes you think, doesn't it. Makes me wonder how many of my 25 000 mornings have included God, whether by prayer or by meditation on his word. For I've never been convinced that you waste a morning if you fail to see the sunrise, and nor am I convinced that you waste a morning if you fail to spend it in Michigan, but I'm pretty sure that you waste a morning if you fail to have some consciousness of God in it, and of the new day as God's gift. 25 000 mornings -- Did we steward them well?

The parable of the talents is a parable about stewardship. It is framed in terms of money, but its point is not really to commend the stock market or at least compound-interest bonds and GICs against the merits of keeping one's money in the sock drawer. The point of the parable is that we have work to do. We are not entrusted with gifts from God so that we can sit on them. We are expected to put them to use, *to partner actively* with God in his great enterprise, and through what we add – be it our own wit or exertion – *to earn an increase* for God.

This parable has shock value still when we hear it today, mostly because we don't expect to find God characterized as “a hard man, harvesting where [he has] not sown and gathering where [he has] not scattered seed,” as a master who would cast the one-talent servant into outer darkness just for giving him back what belonged to him, (though without increase). But this parable would have perplexed Jesus' original audience even more than it does us, because in Jesus' time, capitalism was not yet the order of the day; participation in usury was against the religious law, and financial risk-taking was seen as more immoral than heroic. 9 out of 10 men hearing this parable from Jesus' lips, would have judged the one-talent servant the most prudent of the three, even though the others had proven the more fortunate. Because the parable works *with the grain* of our capitalism, it makes a kind of sense to

us, and so we risk losing a big part of what it has to say, which is just that God does *not* use the same rules of accounting that humanity uses. God’s accounting is different.

Did you ever hear the one about the man who got to the gates of heaven and found that St. Peter was posting an admission fee of one million dollars? Now on earth this man had been very rich, so he approached the pearly gates with an air of confidence: “just wire to my bank on earth,” he said, “and you’ll see, I’m worth well over a million dollars.” St. Peter looked in his ledger and said “really, that’s strange because here we have only a record of \$388 dollars in your account.” The man was outraged: “but how can that be?” he cried. “Phone my bank manager immediately and he’ll get this sorted out.” “I’m sorry” said St. Peter, “we don’t work with the banks down there. They only keep a record of what you have. Here we only keep a record of what you have given away.” Now that story sends the wrong message because it suggests that we get into heaven by our works, by our charitable givings, rather than by the work of Christ, but I like the story for this reason: it makes the point that our ways of accounting are very different than God’s. It reminds me of something Martin Luther once said: “I have held many things in my hands and I have lost them all, but whatever I have placed in God’s hands, that I still possess.” ...And also of something Jesus once said: “Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it” (Matthew 10.39, Luke 17.33).

The parable of the talents is framed in terms of money, but it can be applied to all the things of which we have stewardship. How do we take the life that God has given us, our natural abilities and by our own application, ensure that God receives a dividend on them? How do we do our best to ensure that God receives a dividend of glory in the lives of our children? How do we ensure that there is increase for God on the gospel that we have received? And last but not least, how *do* we use our money, so that it accumulates a dividend for the kingdom, and not just for us?

I have always considered it one of God’s great object lessons that the deaths of Princess Diana and Mother Teresa occurred in the same week. Now Princess Diana did had a public conscience and used her beauty and personal magnetism to draw attention to issues like land mines, but she also represented the vain glitter and self-indulgence of celebrity – the airbrushed exterior, which hid a soul that at times seemed piteously lost. Mother Teresa’s death went almost unnoticed amid the public hysteria and grief over Diana. She was an ugly woman with a lined face and gnarled hands and only one outfit. She had no money in her own name and died among the rot and puke of Calcutta, yet what is heaven’s accounting of those two lives? What shall each of those women say when they come to answer God’s question: “These are the gifts that I gave you. Did you steward them well?”

Last week I issued a challenge which had to do with the level at which we, as individuals and families support the church with our financial giving, and certainly that is a personal stewardship issue. But we are not only the benefactors of the church, when we give. We also *are* the church, which receives the benefaction. This means we have a duty of stewardship which bears upon us as receivers in the church, not only as givers. In this congregation we have annual budget revenues of a little under \$200 000.00. That’s a lot of money. Do we steward it well?

One thing which the parable of the talents teaches clearly is that God will not entrust his kingdom to stewards that sit on their hands. He takes the one talent away from the unprofitable servant and gives it to the fellow with 10 talents. God has placed us as a church in this corner of Guelph in order to preach his gospel and show his love to the world around us. If we lose our focus or frivol around doing other things, then God *will* remove the privilege of being his gospel-bearers from us, and give that privilege to someone who *is* doing the job – who *is* bearing fruit.

Sometimes I wonder if this is not the judgment which has come against the Presbyterian Church in Canada as a whole. Because of our inward focus, because of our lack of courage for

great endeavour, because of our, often vain obsession with in-house procedure, never leading, it seems, to decisive and prophetic action, we seem to have lost our place in Canadian Christendom. God seems to have given the place which Presbyterianism once held to other, younger churches who are doing the job of serving the gospel better. And the justice of God’s judgment is shown in the fact that rather than inspiring us to get back in the game and offer to Christendom what we, as Presbyterians, can *uniquely* offer, we spend our time sneering at the success of “those other” churches, citing our reasons why we would never be caught dead worshipping like them, or organizing ourselves like them.

Sometimes I despair of the Presbyterian Church in Canada and as I’ve said to Herb, I really struggle when asked to enrich *it*. But then I have to ask – when I decide myself, and when I ask others here also, to channel a part of that proportion we set aside for the work of God’s kingdom, into the local budget of this congregation: can I be sure that *we* are a worthy recipient – that giving *here* at Westminster-St. Paul’s, is giving to *God’s* mission in the world. Taking stewardship seriously is a huge thing. It doesn’t only mean financial giving, it means *being* the best church we can be – being as true an instance as we can be, of the church that Christ intended, and perhaps measuring every budgetary decision we make, in the light of how central or peripheral it is to what the New Testament expresses as God’s kingdom’s goals.

If we did that, we might be surprised at the kind of decisions we would make. We might see a whole lot *more* money given *away* and a lot less spent on maintaining our establishment in keeping with our own tastes and traditions. Remember, heaven’s way of accounting is different -- only *what we give* gets recorded, not *what we have*. David Livingstone, the great missionary, had so highly developed a sense of personal stewardship that he could honestly say: “I place no value on anything I have or may possess, *except* in relation to the kingdom of God. If anything will advance the interests of the kingdom, it shall be given away or kept, only as by giving or keeping it I shall most promote the glory of Him to

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whom I owe all my hopes in time or eternity.” Is that not a wonderful goal for a church to aspire to as well? That everything we have or may possess be seen only in the light of how it will advance the interests of God’s kingdom? If anything would advance the ministry of the kingdom, we would dig deeply for it. If anything we should judge as secondary to the ministry, we would be well content without it. This certainly seems to be the way our Lord proceeded: he was all about the ministry, and so careless about the dignity of his own person that he owned neither house nor land. Yet of those God had placed within his hands, needy of redemption, the estranged children of God, he declared “not one of them has been lost” (John 17:9-12). That is stewardship indeed. That is the pattern of stewardship and ministry which Christ gives to his church, and what return will he see?

Now unto him who poured himself out without reserve, without measure, for our salvation, be all honour and glory and praise, all wealth, and power and might, both now and forever (viz. II Cor. 8: 9 and Revelation 5:12).