

Stewardship Means... A Cycle of Blessings, Gifts and Holy Currencies

Deuteronomy 30:19

Nov. 1, 2020 Stewardship series #2

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I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live

Deuteronomy 30:19

Praise God from whom all blessings flow

Praise God all creatures here below

Praise God above ye heavenly host

Creator, Christ and Holy Ghost. Amen.

(Doxology, Old Hundreth)

I grew up singing that doxology as the offering was brought forward down the center aisle of the gothic Presbyterian Church I grew up in in Santa Ana. I've been thinking about that phrase "Praise God from whom all blessings flow." I talked last week in my stewardship sermon about the importance of stewardship as good circulation and flow, that we have resources that need to flow to bring health. I wondered - How do blessings flow?

I was reminded of a story that James Mead told. He wrote:

On a recent mission trip to India, I learned about a fascinating practice of many churches of India. When the church baptize is a new believer, this new member of Christ's church is given the gift of a coconut palm tree. The new believer takes it home and plants it, and within four years, this tree starts to bear fruit. When the coconut palm is young, it will bear about \$50 worth of coconuts a year and, when it matures, it will provide about \$100 of annual income. In India \$100 of yearly income is a very significant amount of money for most people.

The church gives new believers coconut palms for two reasons. First, almost everyone in India is in need, and living in poverty, and the income helps to provide for their family needs. Second, the coconut palms teach a lesson about Christian stewardship. The church tells each new believer that they are invited to give a portion back to the church out of whatever income they get out of that coconut palm tree.

The "coconut tree plan" is a wonderful idea and a great expression of the deeper meanings of Christian stewardship. The income the family gets from the tree comes free entirely as a gift. They don't buy the tree; it is given to them. The family is able to enjoy the fruits of a gift given freely to them and also to have the joy of freely giving something away themselves.

These Christians play a crucial role as stewards in all of this. They have a choice. If they wish, they can take the tree home, put it in a corner, let it die, never growing any coconuts. But they can also choose to plant their tree in a good spot, take care of it, watch over it, and harvest the coconuts. Everything depends on their decision-making. No one forces them to give to the church. People are free to give or not. (1)

This idea that human possessions are really gifts comes from the Bible. There are many places where we are reminded of what we enjoy and how it comes from God.

But sometimes it is difficult for us to remember this because we see our resources as ours. We have worked hard for our incomes. We have focused on our jobs and focused energy on our careers and making our net worth grow. We may have inherited some wealth. We may have made good investments. We have earned what we have. And yet there is much that we have that is truly a gift.

The air we breathe, the water we drink, the wonder of life itself, the planet we live on, the universe – they are gifts we enjoyed out of the overflow of God's love. The love of God is in us and through us. And each of these is a gift to us from God.

Usually when we think of stewardship we define it as our giving to God or to the church something that belongs to us. But really, stewardship is just the reverse – our freely using, enjoying what already belongs to God. And then using and sharing those gifts for the common good. We want to keep these gifts, these blessings, in motion.

In God's creation, everything is circulating, being recycled. I remember learning in Biology class that the oxygen we breathe into our lungs is used to refresh our blood; in exchange, we breathe out carbon dioxide, which plants and other green organisms take in, working with the earth's sun and water through the process of photosynthesis, creating not only food but releasing oxygen for us and other creatures to breathe in. Our roles as beloved of God are to be part of the recirculation of resources so that all living things on earth may share in God's abundance.

We are to receive God's love and truth like water as God's love and truth and word works through our lives, our communities, and our nation's, it enables growth, rejuvenates communities, and then is recycled again.

A few years ago I read a book and then attended a conference led by Eric Law. He is an Episcopal priest in Los Angeles who founded the Kaleidoscope Institute. He helps churches think about the Cycle of Blessings. This Cycle is based on four fundamental assumptions;

Everything comes from God

God gives abundantly

We are not to keep God's resources; we are to circulate these resources.

God's blessings are then recycled to create more blessings.

He tells an important story about how his growing up shaped his understanding of the Cycle of Blessings. He writes:

My family was considered poor by the monetary-minded world, but I did not know it. We did not have much money, because as far back as I can remember, money was coming in and going out, and coming in and going out again. However, in the process, no one was hungry. There was also a job for anyone who wanted to work and be part of the currency of money that moves through the family business.... My mother once explained to me about our family business this way: "we don't make a lot of money. But everyone who works in the business gets a piece of it."... I have always thought of currency as something that moves.

My parents started a music school in Hong Kong in the 1960s which has continued until today in New York City with the same business model - a sustainable business that never makes much money but certainly has made a lot of friends and provided a livelihood for many people over the years. People such as music teachers who were like my parents' daughters and sons, workers who were like brothers and sisters to us growing up, and students who had grown up and brought their children to take music lessons at our music school. The company has not made much money. But it is the movement of the money, "the currency," that has kept the business going providing jobs, learning, and enrichment for thousands of people over the years. Here's how it works:

My father was a furniture maker. He got in the business of assembling pianos, focusing on the carpentry work. My mother noticed that it was very expensive for a child to learn to play the piano - the family had to buy a piano and pay for private lessons. She also noticed that children did not have a lot of places to go after school. She further noticed that parents who worked could use a few more hours each week to do what they needed to do to support their families. What she noticed was that the truth that drove a possible business and ministry need. With my father's construction and carpentry skills, we built a number of soundproofed rooms in our apartment, put a piano in each room, and hired teachers to offer lessons. We charged the parents a modest amount each month; in exchange the students received 1/2 hour lesson once week and they can come to practice five days a week. The fee collected would be shared equally with the teachers - 50% for the teacher and 50% for the school to support the staff who administer the programs. The modest amount of money that the parents paid flowed into supporting a time and place for their children to learn and have a safe place after school. This money further flowed into providing an income for the teachers in exchange for their leadership and expertise. The currency continued to flow and providing jobs for others. The company never made any money because

money did not stay; it kept moving. It's flowed in constructive directions, providing blessings for many.

I grew up with a Chinese saying, "Water is money." ... When water does not flow, it creates opportunities for destructive things to grow. In other words, it rots. I would say the same thing goes for money and resources: when we when they are not flowing, or when we hold on to them, they turn rotten and become breeding pools for trouble and unsustainability. (2)

Eric Law helped me understand blessings and currency in a new way. The word *currency* comes from the medieval Latin word *currentia*, which means "a flowing" and the Latin word *currere* which means "to run or flow." It was John Locke in 1699 who first used the word *currency* to refer to the circulation of money. Since then the word *currency* in the English language has been most used most often as referring to money.

Merriam-Webster defines *currency* as "something that is in circulation as a medium of exchange." I think that this is important. Law explores the concept of currency beyond just money. He did research with churches and nonprofits and small businesses to understand what makes ministries and programs sustainable and have a positive impact. His key question was: What other currencies are flowing through this ministry? As he learned more and more about what made ministries sustainable and positive impact, several currencies, mediums of exchange, kept surfacing as keys to their success They are:

- Time and place
- Gracious leadership
- Relationships
- Truth
- Wellness
- Money

Eric Law calls these six - Holy Currencies. How can our church enable these currencies to flow into our congregation and back out into the community?

Currency of Time and Place: Paid and volunteer time that leaders and members offer to the church for ministry. Using the church building and property as currency. I think our church does a very good job of using our building and property in multiple ways for the congregation and the community. We obviously cannot do that during the shelter in place, but I believe there will come a time when our congregation and groups from the community will gather in our building and that is a valuable use and currency of time and place. How might we continue to be more intentional about this currency and some off site ministries as well?

Currency of Gracious Leadership: The ability to use skills, tools, models and processes to create gracious environments with in which mutually respectful relationships and discernment of truth across differences can be built. I think our church is doing a good job of this where we provide leadership within the church but certainly in the community as we face complex and important issues. Members of the church serve on boards and provide important leadership to make decisions for the common good. Are there some ways our church can take the lead to make an impact some particular needs in the community?

Currency of Relationships: The internal and external networks and mutually respectful connections that leaders and members of a church and ministry have. I think this is one of the strengths of our church the currency of relationships and friendships that grow in the church around projects and worship and fun and social interactions we have many good relationships within the community and within the Presbytery and beyond. How might we continue to build bridges with communities or groups we don't currently have relationships?

Currency of Truth: The ability to articulate individually and corporately the global and holistic truthful internally and externally. We recently had a discussion about the contemplative ministries of our church and how it helps us articulate a non-dualistic way of thinking. It is an important truth to help people grasp. We speak the truth about people who are unhoused in our community and how not to stereotype them or treat them as less than human. There are opportunities to speak truth in many ways.

Currency of Wellness: The state of being healthy physically, socially, economically, ecologically and spiritually within a church or ministry neighborhood Town Nation. We look for ways to promote all kinds of wellness.

Currency of Money: Something generally accepted as a medium of exchange a measure of value or means of payment. And at this time of year we particularly are lifting up the currency of money in our stewardship campaign and how it enables some of these other currencies to move and flow into the congregation and back out to the community.

The Cycle of Blessings is the dynamic exchanges of the six currencies, flowing inward to renew and strengthen internal relationships and increased gracious leadership capacity, and flowing outward to connect, discern the truth, and foster wellness in the wider community. Learning how to develop access and flow these currencies are essential skills that members of the church must have to make our church sustainable. (3)

We are called to move from a perspective of scarcity to abundance. How can our church deepen our understanding of how these 6 currencies can flow into our life together and back out? This will take continued study and reflection.

May we see abundance instead of scarcity,
hope instead of fear,
and know that love flows from the Beloved to sustain us. Amen.

- 1) James Mead, "Enjoying What Belongs to God." Featured in *Speaking of Stewardship: Model Sermons on Money and Possessions*, William Carter, editor. 1998 Homiletical Feast
- 2) Eric Law, *Holy Currencies: 6 Blessings for Sustainable Missional Ministries* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2013) pp. 7-9.
- 3) Law, pp. 11-12