

**"Stewardship and Worthless Slaves"
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When Jesus gathered his disciples together for the last time the night of his arrest, John's gospel tells of a remarkable gesture that is still very difficult for us to imagine or understand. He did more than giving them the authority of his position to cast out demons and to heal the sick. That is what we might understand as delegation. It is the extension of his authority to do those things as agents of God.

But what John shows us is more radical than that. It is that he calls his followers "friends" because, as he puts it, they know what he is doing. Instead of a "need to know" basis, they have access to the source of Jesus' own understanding and authority. This recognition is way bigger than we can understand or put into practice. It is a vision for our participation in God and our relatedness to one another. And it is in this context that Jesus' statements in our gospel reading today can best be understood.

If we are servants or agents of Christ, then we can be praised and blamed, judged in relation to others and evaluated as to how well we are maintaining and carrying out the master's directions and intentions. But Jesus in sayings like the one we hear today is going even further. To understand what he is up to is to share as equals in God's essential relationship with his only son. Paul makes this same point using different imagery. He says that we are no longer servants but "sons and daughters" and thus "joint heirs" with Christ.

So, since we are already approved, we should stop looking for approval and disapproval, for praise and blame. This is what Jesus means when he says we should regard ourselves as "unworthy slaves" or in a softer translation, as "unprofitable servants." St. Paul says the same thing when he writes to the Romans, "For by the grace given to me, I tell everyone among you not to think of herself more highly than she should think. Instead, think sensibly, as God has distributed a measure of faith to each one."

This is the time of year when we turn our attention to how the church is supported by the generosity of its members, of you. And we clergy try to frame the issue in terms of our own spirituality, in terms of gratitude to God for the boundless gifts he gives us, for the simple glance or touch of a spouse or a loved one, the wonderful challenge of our work, for our children and parents, and for the very faith that we exercise in this community. It goes without saying, that we usually take these things for granted. This season provides occasion for us to give thanks to all of you for your generous support for this wonderful parish and to be

reminded that everything we have and give comes from God and belongs to God. I want to suggest a vision of stewardship based on our status as Jesus friends, God's children.

The Dynamics of Vision

The passage from the prophet Habakkuk urges us to wait for a vision of what the Lord is doing. Prophetic vision is not always welcome. Sometimes it is a vision of judgment, a clear-eyed look at the consequences of our attitudes, values and actions. Judgment is ultimately self-inflicted. It can only be attributed to God in that because God who so radically bestows freedom upon us he can be said to be responsible or be seen as bringing judgment upon us.

As the psalm has it: "The wicked draw their sword and bend their bow. . . [but] their sword shall go through their own heart. ." So the vision for which the prophet is told to wait is not about God striking down the wicked but simply a clear reading of the "signs of the times." It's like the point that Malcolm X made when President Kennedy was assassinated about the "chickens come home to roost." In the same way prophets are usually people who are marginal to their society and thus susceptible to being accused of disloyalty or treason or to inciting violence. When they make simple "if . . . then, " cause and effect statements about how the poor and the oppressed will rise up they are easily accused of threatening such uprising.

Vision, of course, can mean many things. As the lesson puts it "it is about the end," it is about results, outcomes, about the effect that current causes are bringing about. So when we use it to refer to a plan or a picture of a desired future, it is because we believe or trust that God is leading us toward that future.

Two Kinds of Logic

But we should be careful to not too quickly assume or take for granted what that end or outcome will be. Because generally our assessments are made on the basis of the logic and thinking in which we are formed. And that is inevitably the world's logic of power, a vision of scarcity and of "strife and contention" that is based on idolatry. Our thinking is unavoidably formed and shaped by the logic of the "wicked" whose "justice and dignity proceed from themselves." The vision for which the prophet is told to wait ("for the appointed time, for it will surely come, it will not delay") is a function of a different kind of logic, the logic of the community the prophet calls the "righteous who live by faith."

When the disciples ask Jesus to increase their "faith," they are asking out of the thinking of the world, where faith like everything is in short supply and it's how much you have compared to the next person that matters. And instead of answering them, as we might expect, by sharing secrets for building their faith, he

starts talking about trees being planted in the sea. It's not so much that some people are short on faith and others are long on it and here's how you can get more. But rather Jesus' non sequitur shows that faith means getting in tune with God's purpose and plan. It's the capacity to wait for the vision, to calmly trust God to bring about the promised future. That's what constitutes faith even if from the point of view of the logic of the wicked it seems not to pay off.

For the logic of the "wicked" is that it's a pay as you go world and that generosity for its own sake is foolishness. It teaches that we should meter our gifts on a quid pro quo basis and that we should expect something in return. But the logic of faith is counter-cultural and actually challenges the logic of our world. It claims, for instance, that our giving to the church is not done for the sake of the church but for our own sake. It is its own reward. It is getting in tune with God who is all giving. From the perspective of faith it is as natural and irresistible as the germination of a mustard seed. But from the point of view of the world it is as absurd as planting a tree in the sea. So Jesus says don't expect to be commended for how much you give or condemned for how little. And don't think that because you give a lot or a little you're either good or better or bad or worse than anyone else. That's the world's way of judging. Just say, "I'm an unprofitable servant."

The True Task of Stewardship

This is a challenging time of year as we face the task of funding our exciting programs and ministries while trying to keep in balance the real work of stewardship, that is the inner work of continuing conversion to life in Christ. On the one hand we want to appreciate all that we do and all the blessings that we provide our people and this community through our annual budget and hold these up as worthy of support. And we want to thank and praise our supporters for their generosity. On the other hand we want to challenge people and invite people into a new dimension of grace. It's a dimension characterized by abundance, openness and forgiveness.

But we should not kid ourselves. Money is the instrument of power par excellence in our culture and in our communities and families. Guilt and shame are associated in the world that forms and shapes us around issues related to money with want and lack. The message of stewardship, of giving out of our sense of abundance rather out of our lack, of giving out of love and gratitude rather than out of fear and guilt, is the message we wrestle with ourselves each year to proclaim. And we need to hear it each year at this time because the kind of giving it calls us to, and that many of us practice, is a life preserver to so many struggling to stay afloat in this spiritual shipwreck of a world. Only by letting go in our giving of the need to compete and excel, that is to vie for God's approval— only by letting go in our giving of the urge to reward the church or its leadership for success or to punish it for one offense or another, that is to surrender as a "victim"

our prerogative for revenge— only then can we glory in the powerlessness of our exalted status of “worthless slaves.”

Let me put it this way. We like the disciples we are seeking to grow spiritually, to be more mature, more present to those we love, our children, our spouse, our co-workers, to God. What tips or teachings can we gain from Jesus to help us grow? Jesus’ response is abrupt and a little disquieting. It’s as if he says, “Hey! It’s not about you. And it’s not about me.” It’s about participating in God’s very life, about sharing the generosity, love, justice, forgiveness, and peace of God. This is a hard lesson for us to learn, but it’s the beginning of enlightenment. It’s not about us. It’s about the “vision” that’s coming. We must wait for it while meeting everyone where they are. To those who respond to the world’s logic, we give the world’s logic. But to those who are ready we must always be prepared to proclaim the good news of the generosity of God and invite them to imitate that generosity as “worthless slaves.” God’s church, God’s vision, will not lack God’s resources. The challenge for us is to give like God, freely, prodigally, of our substance, yet without being caught up in the “strife and contention” and resentment that rules our hearts whenever the issue of money is brought there.

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