

“Stewardship as Home Economics: Living and Loving Abundantly”

Acts 2:42-47, Psalm 23, John 10:1-10

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We celebrate ourselves as “Body Parts & Spirit Congregations” throughout this spring cycle of the liturgical year – Lent, Passiontide and Easter, fifty days of Jubilee – until Jesus comes again as the Spirit on Pentecost Day, to create the Church as the body of Christ freed and filled with his Spirit! . . . We celebrate just how much like parts of our own bodies the bodies of life and love all around us can be --beginning as homes, as households, as congregations, as communities, and extending to regions and nations, world and universe. We are all parts of one another! And what happens to any one part is felt by us all.

Today we are called to lift up the life and love of (the) faith household and faith family as “stewardship,” “home economics,” “taking care of the world-family business,” in eager anticipation of Consecration Sunday with Rev. Bob Olmstead next week! If the universe and all the earth may be seen as the household of God, then all stewardship of resources, lands and peoples is good economy, good ecology, and good ecumenicity. We are all in this life and this love together! Connecting stewardship to our texts for this morning tempted me to preach on “Lamb’s Stew--ardship,” or “Good Shepherd’s Pie,” or even just plain “Sheep Dip!” If Bob Dylan were preaching this Sunday, it might be, “Everybody Just Get Stewed!” (Get the shepherd’s crook!) The best shepherds and leaders have “been there” as sheep, as lambs, themselves. Jesus is both the Good Shepherd and the Lamb! Sheepled shepherds and shepherded sheep: it takes one to know one!

We are all in this together! Shepherds, like stewards, are always concerned with wholeness of the flock. They notice when even a single sheep is missing. Jesus says they leave ninety-nine who are found in search of one who is lost. Stewardship is for the flock, one made up of so many, wholeness of life and love in the body, the home, the church -- birth to earth, womb to tomb, sperm to worm, as we say. The good news of the church, in this most individualistic and privatized of cultures, is we are not made to be alone but to be in relationship, in connection, with anyone and with everyone. We are all in this life and this love together! (Speaking of national “home economics,” I hope we take time to consider “stewardship” both as “spiritual security” and as “Social Security” these days. Both are based on what John Paul II calls “Solidarity,” mutual trust and investment in the common good, the commonweal, the common wealth!)

The Early Church used the 23rd Psalm not just at the end of life, as we often do, but at the beginning, as an allegory for baptismal preparation, which happens to one but connects one with all. According to Gail Ramshaw, “Green pastures” were seen as the weeks of instruction for baptism. “Still waters” were baptism. “Restorings of soul” were revival by the Spirit. “Paths of righteousness” were the

new life of faithfulness. “Oils” were the chrism of baptism. “Table” and “cup overflowing” were Eucharist. “Pastor” and “pastoral counseling” have to do with work in relationship to the flock, the church as body of Christ, as faith family. When I am presented with “pastoral” needs, from inside or outside the congregation, I am clear that the source of care and nurture, healing and wholeness, restoration and recovery I represent is the life and love of the congregation. I am not any kind of therapist or counselor apart from you.

We believe Jesus our shepherd, Jesus our steward, knows each and all of us intimately, calls each and all of us by our own names, looks after each and all of us as we have need, and offers each and all of us everyday the chance to “have life, and have it abundantly!” We trust Jesus as shepherd and steward with everything of our lives and our loves – all that we are, all that we have, all that we feel and think, and say and do. We know the voice of Jesus and how it differs for us from all other voices. We know the difference between just “believing in Christ” and actually “following Jesus.” We know it seems possible for us to believe yet never get around to following. We also know it is not possible to follow very long without also coming to believe. To believe in Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, the one who brings New Creation as God’s life and love for us all, is to believe in the body of Christ, in the one membership of many parts. We believe in relationship and in connection, not only with those we can see (for in that sense seeing is not believing) but with all those unseen by us, as well.

To believe in Jesus as the body of Christ freed and filled with the Spirit is to believe in the church as family, as home, as that place where the poet says “when you go there they have to take you in,” as base of support for our life and our love, our work in every other part of our lives and in the whole world. Stewardship as home economics is the care and feeding of every member of the whole household of God. It is embodying, making real flesh, God’s life and love for us in all the places, all the spaces of our lives. The church is made up like home as a body with many parts. . . . Please think through what “makes a house a home” – the various forms and functions of rooms and spaces – living room, dining room, bedding room, bathing room, cooking room, sewing room, studying room, praying room – whatever! . . .

So much of stewardship revolves around and out of this church-building, the sheepfold we call home. I want to give special thanks this morning to [some individuals and church groups] . . . and all other groups who give love and care for us all. This building -- all that goes on in it, all that goes on out of it -- belongs to us all in a process, as we are, of constant becoming. We organize parts of our body into groups for most age levels – for finance and personnel, building and property – for nurture, witness, outreach – and in every way we are learning and changing and growing and open to all! . . .

The life and work, the ministry and mission this building embodies and represents, even now is evolving, emerging, being born and baptized, and

confirmed and commissioned, again and again and again. Think of what its spaces meant to Babette's Feast this past week -- as to the Valentine's Dinner. Think what its catacombs mean to the Youth Group and Sunday School each week. Think what this sanctuary, in all the senses of the term, means to every service of worship and every wedding! Think what this building means to all AA and NA and other healing and wholeness, restoration and recovery groups. Think what it means to . . . the whole alphabet soup of building-users. Think even what it means to those who lie down in its window wells and its stairwells, perhaps the only "green pastures" and "still waters" they know, and, yes, they may well mess up appearances and aggravate office staff.

So think of Audrey and Shirley as shepherds to so many "lost sheep" and stewards of such precious resources. Think how many of us, by choices and by necessities, serve in some shepherding, stewarding roles and responsibilities, even in our own homes, own families, even with spouses and partners. The safest thing to say in light of these texts for this morning is, every one of us is a shepherd! Every one of us is a sheep! And no sheep without plenty of sheep dip! It goes with the very territory of hospitality! It goes with the "downtown church," we are by location and are becoming by vocation, trying to be "at home" to such a changing and growing downtown community. It goes with "following Jesus," becoming the body of Christ, lives and life together freed and filled with his Spirit.

We are called to ministry and mission by the very nature of this building to us -- this building we both inherit from the past and borrow against the future. We are called not to be "real estate" or "property value." We are called to be "sacred trust," temporal stewardship of eternal gifts and graces, and therefore, in our current issues with the city and state, essentially "inassessible" . . . -- beyond measure, beyond calculation God help us if we do not put all of that on the line for God in Jesus by the Spirit everyday of our life together.

Just see and hear in the Book of Acts, which I hope we may study this summer, as "The Book of Gifts of the Spirit," how the Early Church lived and loved out God's word in body and soul together! Just look and listen to our shepherding and our stewarding of the parts of our household and home, of our lives and life together -- in teaching, in fellowship, in breaking of bread, in prayer! In what our membership vows call prayers, presence, gifts, and service! In what the "base community" movement (so much like the Early Church) calls seeing, judging, acting, reflecting. In what every service of worship holds as praise, confession, word, and offering. God is the Giver of all parts of life and living. Stewardship is our part and participation in the ongoing life-living, life-loving, life-giving of God! Cosmic Creator, Daily Provider, Sanctifier, Sustainer. . . .

Amen.