

The Joyful Responsibility of Our Blessings

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost – October 19, 2003

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage

Deuteronomy 6:10-12 (NRSV)

¹⁰When the LORD your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you – a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, ¹¹houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant – and when you have eaten your fill, ¹²take care that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

Luke 16:1-2 (NRSV)

Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. ²So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’”

*Today, in preparation for Commitment Sunday on November 9, we begin a four-week series:
“Sharing Our Blessings”*

Delight

In what or in whom do you delight? Do you delight in anything? Delight comes easily to children, but not so easily to adults. It seems as if delight gets squeezed out of us as we take on the responsibilities of adulthood. This is despite the fact that we live such blessed lives.

In recent weeks we’ve been talking about finding the deep and enduring joy that is grounded in our relationship with God. In some ways, this conversation will continue in the coming weeks; hence, the title of today’s study. But I’m using the word “delight” because it conveys the pleasure we should find in the things of God, including the many blessings he has showered upon us.

This week kicks off our fall campaign, “Sharing Our Blessings.” In these background studies, we’ll talk about finding joy in our many blessings, the responsibilities that come with these blessings, remembering God in the midst of our blessings, and the tangible fruit of these blessings that surround us.

The source of our delight and blessings

In the beginning . . . God created a world of delight. A world of great bounty and breathtaking beauty. A world of few rules and much goodness. God created humans in his own image, giving them royal dominion over the delightful world God had made. God would come in the evenings to walk with them. This place was theirs to enjoy and to work. They were

Finding Delight

I like Disney. Strolling through DisneyWorld, I’m often struck by how much it seems to be a place of sheer delight. The five year-old busily working on a pile of pancakes, who begins to beam when she realizes that Winnie-the-Pooh is standing behind her. The two boys who exit Space Mountain unsteadily but laughing and racing to ride it again. (Ok . . . the 52-year-old getting to ride Pirates again!)

Too often, we adults tend to think of such things as “guilty pleasures.” Instead, we need to see these moments of delight as little windows into the kingdom of God, this unseen, but very real, parallel universe awash in joy and love and contentment and peace and laughter. There are many such windows. We experience them, but often without knowing why they resonate within us.

This resonance is a reflection of God. It may be a moment when you appreciate the crispness of a fall morning or a well-turned phrase in a book. Perhaps a family gathering when everyone is a good mood or the thank-you from a small child for the time you spent with her in Sunday School. It might be even be a simple random act of kindness. We need to take the time to see through these windows of delight. They remind us of the inherent goodness of creation and point us toward the Creator. God wants us to delight in his creation and to be thankful for it.

blessed beyond measure by all that God had given them. All these images of the Garden of Eden are meant to remind us that God has given us countless gifts and blessings that we are to enjoy – in which we are to delight! – and for which we are to be thankful.

Today’s passage from Deuteronomy also points us toward God’s gifts to us. These verses are taken from Moses’ last speech to the Israelites as they prepared to enter Canaan, the Promised Land,

under the leadership of Joshua. Though the land had been promised them by God, there was one problem – people already lived there! Moving into Canaan would happen only by conquest . . . a conquest to be led by God himself.¹ Thus, the Israelites would live in cities and homes that had been built by others. They would drink from wells that others had dug. They would pick grapes from vineyards that had been planted by others. All this God would give them. Surely, God wanted them to understand that the blessings they would enjoy in Canaan were to be given to them by God. He would be the source of their blessings and their delight.

Responsibilities

One of our many blessings is work. We sometimes forget that work was part of the Garden of Eden – before Adam and Eve disobeyed God. Work is part of God’s good creation. As the rest of the Garden of Eden was a delight, so should our work be a source of delight and joy, not a burden. The fact that work is often burdensome is a sign that this world is in need of redemption (see Romans 8:18-25). As Christians, we are called to make every part of our lives and the lives of others reflect God’s kingdom, including our lives at work.

With work comes responsibilities. God has entrusted his creation to us. He has charged us with the responsibility to manage it well – to protect it and nourish it, to help it grow and thrive so that all persons might see its delight and be pointed toward its Creator.

Today’s verses from Luke begin one of Jesus’ more puzzling parables, though all the puzzling stuff will have to await another day. For now, we note only that the master is angry that his manager has squandered what was entrusted to him. The master expected better. He should have. Similarly, we are responsible for what God has entrusted to us. God hopes that we will enjoy and find delight in all corners of his creation. But he also wants us to use it well, to manage it carefully, and to help others see God in the glories of his creation.

Trustees?

Often, when we speak of our responsibilities in managing the blessings God has entrusted to us, we speak of our “stewardship” – especially at this time of year! In Greek, the word for house is *oikos* and the person who oversees the house, who manages it, is called an *oikonomos*.¹ This word is used ten times in the New Testament and is translated variously (based on the context) as steward, or manager, or treasurer in the NRSV¹. Today’s passage from Luke begins a parable about a bad “steward” or “manager” (Luke 16: 1-13). It is the story of a trusted steward who squanders the property of his master, which was a particularly despicable crime in Jesus’ day. The moral of the story is something like this: use what you possess to serve people because everything you have was given you by God!

Leonard Sweet suggests that “steward” is probably not the best way to think about this. After all, he notes, who really uses the word anymore, other than to refer to someone you might meet on a cruise ship! Instead, Sweet suggests that “trustee” is more meaningful for us and would be a better translation of the Greek. Many of us have some experience with trusts and the responsibilities held by trustees, even if it is simply some sort of family estate. When we think of ourselves as God’s trustees, the message of the Bible becomes a little clearer. We are given dominion over God’s creation, not so we can rule as a tough or selfish taskmaster, but so we can be effective trustees of God’s wealth, managing it wisely, helping it to grow and flourish. God’s creation is not ours, we don’t own it; rather, we hold it in trust for God!

¹Both in its themes and in its specifics, the stories of the Israelites’ conquest of Canaan are some of the most troubling in the Bible. The very idea that God’s purposes would be worked out through such violence repulses many Christians. In the winter term of the Bible Academy (Jan-Mar), I will teach *Introducing the Old Testament* on Tuesday afternoons and Wednesday evenings. In it, we will tackle the hard questions that arise from the Old Testament, including these wars of conquest led by God.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Genesis 1:24-2:25 God creates humankind and entrusts them with his creation</p>	<p>Day 2 Deuteronomy 6 The larger section from which this week's verses were taken. It is about being loyal to God.</p>
<p>Day 3 Romans 8:18-25 The redemption of all creation is bound up with our own.</p>	<p>Day 4 1 Corinthians 4:1-2 Our blessings extend beyond the material and so do our responsibilities.</p>
<p>Day 5 Luke 16:1-9 The entire parable of the shrewd manager. Don't jump to quick solutions as to its meaning!</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Are you in a Sunday morning class? If not – try one!

Scott Engle's new Sunday morning class, *Something More*, is open to all adults. We meet in Wesley Hall (the 'old' sanctuary) at 9:30. It is a great chance to make new friends and learn more about the Bible and the Christian faith. More than 140 people have joined the class! The class is based on the Sunday morning sermon series and background studies. It is a lecture-oriented class, but there is always plenty of time for questions, answers, and fellowship.

Please join us next week!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. You might begin your reflection or discussion this week by making a list of the things or moments in life in which you find the greatest delight. What do they have in common? In the study, I referred to such moments as windows into the Kingdom of God. What do you think I meant? Why would I call God's kingdom a "parallel universe"? If you accept what I say, at least for the sake of discussion, how might the many blessings we enjoy point us toward God? What might they reveal to us about God? It is pretty easy for many of us to let the stresses and anxiety of life crowd out any real sense of delight in our daily lives. How can we go about recapturing a daily awareness of and delight in the many blessings that God has given us?
2. What do the words "steward" or "stewardship" mean to you? This background study suggests that "trustee" might be a better way to think of our responsibilities. What does "trustee" mean to you? Do you think that it is a more meaningful way to think about our role in managing God's assets?
3. John Wesley didn't tithe. He used what he needed for himself and then put to work the rest of God's wealth that had been entrusted to him. When he was a young man he made 30 pounds a year. He figured out that he needed 28 pounds a year to live on and gave two pounds to the church. When his income increased to 50 pounds, he kept 28 and gave 22. When he made 100 pounds a year, he kept 28 and gave 72. This was Wesley's understanding of what it means to be a good trustee. Wesley's approach turns tithing on its head. What would be the consequences for each of us if we followed Wesley's example? What would it mean for St. Andrew and God's church?