



November 4, 2018

Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift
"Doing the Stewardship Stretch"

THE INTRODUCTION TO THE READING

The city of Corinth was a dynamic and diverse place. It was a thriving center of commerce and a crossroads for many cultures doing business together. Jew and Gentile co-existed and the gospel message of Jesus Christ, which the church proclaimed and embodied, attracted both the upper-crust and slaves.

All were welcome into this new faith community, yet the members of the church who had been converted to Jesus Christ still struggled with the old habits of their upbringing. The society in which they existed was very stratified in terms of economic station and class. It was a society in which wealthy patrons sponsored those who were less well off, and people were usually beholden to certain leaders and not others. This is why the church, though it knew that all people were created in the image of God and everyone was to be valued in the Body of Christ, still succumbed to bickering and divisions. Just before this section of his letter, Paul referred to the negative way that the church had been dividing their loyalty between their ministers, saying, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Peter."

Paul strongly admonishes them to remember that they *all* belong to Jesus Christ and then instructs them on the nature of servant leadership.

THE READING

The Apostle Paul writes: "Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. ²Moreover, it is required of stewards that they should be found trustworthy."

SERMON

A few years back a television ad caught my attention because it used religious language to describe the medical group of which my primary care physician is a part. In 2012 Steward Health Care ran the "I am a Steward" campaign, featuring employees from all avenues of patient care. "I am a Steward," each said to the camera, letting us see the people who represent the care in health care.

I bet that you see yourselves as stewards too, stewards who take care of material and practical matters for God and for others.

For example, you are stewards of your own health and personal well-being. You are a steward. For a house to be a home, its residents need to attend to schedules and upkeep, IT and laundry – to be stewards who care for the material and practical. At work, if you have responsibility over a particular department within the whole company, then you are a steward of the goals that help it reach its mission. According to our Judeo-Christian heritage, God made human beings stewards of this amazing creation – “to till and keep it” – so that it continues to flourish for all (Genesis 2:15).

As Paul points out, it's most important that stewards be trustworthy. Tri Con, for instance, benefits from excellent stewards of our building, grounds, and finances! Staff and lay leaders are on top of things in terms of budget, expenses, and needs. They consider it part of their identity to care for the material side of church, and they do so with dollars and sense. S-E-N-S-E.

Yet, this morning – the scripture reading was short and quick – notice with me how Paul describes the identity of a Christian steward: we are “servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries.” Servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries.

My goodness, that's a stretch! It appears that to be a steward is to be entrusted with much more than money. The apostle is declaring that you and I take care of the invisible and the unknown workings of God! We are to give attention to that which is beyond our grasp – much less under our control; to be in awe more often than to be in authority. You and I are stewards of the Transcendent as much as the tangible. Stewards of God’s mysteries. Hmm.

This is a mental summersault! It feels a bit like the paradigm shift that science has made over the last century. Newtonian physics focused on the substances and entities that make up the universe, how they move and exert force upon other elements. This rather mechanical approach to science was very interested in cause and effect, especially in how we humans could control and capitalize upon nature, and it did get us to the moon. Then with the theory of relativity and the rise of quantum physics, science in my view has become more humble and, like the mystics, has begun to perceive that the space between objects is not dead and empty, but dynamic and vital to the entire system. To put it way too simply: the unseen is real too; mystery holds things together.¹

Like us, the Corinthian Christians to whom Paul wrote this letter felt more secure when they had money in the bank and clear-cut tasks to accomplish. When they could get things

¹Please excuse the lay description of this much more complicated paradigm shift. I did take a moment to run it by my husband, who taught science, including physics and astronomy, for fifteen years in the public schools, but any mistakes I've put here are mine alone.

done that bettered their own lives, their confidence increased, even when, unlike us, they had virtually no say so at all over their country, its leaders, or the political forces moving around them.

But they *also* knew that there was more to life than the material, and they had converted to Christianity because the Gospel Story had revealed how the Divine works in the world: in unfathomable love, desiring to reach, connect with, and save us from ourselves, God was born of a woman, walked on this beautiful earth, both in light and darkness, submitted to the vicissitudes of physical existence and to political machinations, suffered in execution, but could not be extinguished, arising to life in ultimate victory!

Then, instead of simply escaping back to heaven, Jesus Christ shared the Holy Spirit with the church, to abide with and enable us to bear its fruit. In cooperation with all faiths and people of goodwill, the Living Christ continues to love and pursue God's ways in the real world, as it is!

These practical, down-to-earth Corinthians found this message compelling and life-giving. God is the Owner and Author of *both* the material and the mysterious; you and I are Spirit-empowered, discerning stewards. Yes, I know, this *is* a stretch!

That reminds me: two and a half years ago, I landed in the ER twice with passing-out pain. Thankfully, it wasn't a heart attack; it was slipping, arthritic cervical discs in my upper spine, numbers six and seven, that were pinching, inflaming, and compromising my neck, shoulders, back, side and the nerve all the way down my left arm – debilitating! Tests, medicine, and rest all helped, but it was the course of physical therapy that did the most good. I cooperated with the mystery of it all as my Steward health care provider supervised exercises – mostly stretching. To this day, I do them religiously, because it is necessary; I can maybe skip one or two days at most, but if I do, I stiffen and can feel the cervical radiculopathy coming on again.

Today, Paul is sending you and me into life-giving physical and spiritual therapy – stewardship therapy, if you'll allow me. In order to integrate and grow – in order to live into our true identity as stewards of God's mysteries, you and I must do the 'stewardship stretch.'

For example, in my opinion, these days we Christians cannot afford to live in the false passive dichotomy between faith and politics. By all means, vote! Good stewards do this. But I think we *also* need to host respectful, theological conversations, on-the-ground, about the values and vision that guide our nation. **Do you feel the stretch?**

These last weeks of pie parties and household discussions around financial pledging have been a form of stewardship therapy; helping us put first things first. **Tri Con, do you feel the stretch?**

Love is the divine mystery that holds it all together and leads us into a worthwhile future. Love of God, self, and neighbor cannot be compartmentalized as much as we might



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try; we are to love God with *all* our hearts, minds, soul, and strength. **Good Stewards, do you feel the stretch?**