

CHAPTER IX

AN INTRODUCTION TO STEWARDSHIP

Money is often the first thought that comes to mind when the word "stewardship" is spoken. This is an unfortunate situation. Stewardship is about one's whole life, not just the pocketbook. At the same time the fact that the "pocketbook" often occurs to us when we hear the word "stewardship," suggests something about the importance of our wealth and its fundamental place in our lives. This chapter deals with the whole aspect of stewardship in the life of the Christian. Like other parts of this program, this can only be a glance at one of the most important aspects of the Christian life. But it should be enough to serve as an introduction to the subject-if only rudimentary.

Stewardship is a whole way of life. It is how we manage and care for, in a responsible manner, the world around us, and our own gifts and abilities. It is an attitude that is often only slowly developed and matured in us as we become informed by and grow in the liturgy and a life of commitment. The foundations of stewardship are contained in the ancient texts of the Bible. These foundations are part of the very fabric that creates the identity of the people of God. They are found in some of the most ancient parts of the text and ancient stories of the prehistory of the people of God. They form part of the ancient cosmology that shapes the identity of the people, and, in turn, shapes our own identities as well.

The story of Cain and Abel is often a confusing story. Cain was the tiller of the soil, a farmer. Abel was a herdsman; he cared for the sheep and goats. The two brothers offered a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God from the gifts they had in turn received. But God did not accept (regard) Cain's sacrifice. What kind of God is this that does not accept the gifts that God's people offer? What was wrong with Cain's gift? Abel offers "of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions"(Gen. 4.4), the best portion of his herd. Cain, on the other hand, offers the mediocre parts of his crops, not the best. We come before God offering the best that we have, not just enough to get by.

In Deuteronomy 26 there is the injunction with its accompanying instructions to offer the first fruits. "When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, 'Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us.' When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, you shall make this response before the LORD your God: 'A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived

there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.' You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God." (Deut. 26.1-11).

Deuteronomy reminds us after declaring the acts of God in giving the land to Israel with all of its produce and riches saying, "Do not say to yourself, 'My power and might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.' But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today." (Deut. 8.17-18).

OFFERING OUR GIFTS

In the Eucharist we offer the bread and wine; this is the Offertory. We also offer our money. In the early church, the congregants, gathering for the Sunday celebration, brought the loaves of bread, made with flour ground from their own wheat, and bottles of wine, made from their own grapes-as well as olives and cheese. This was the offering of the day. The deacon took the amount needed for the Eucharist and placed it on the altar-table before the bishop. The remainder was set aside to be distributed to the poor and widowed. Later part of the offering went to the bishop or priest as part of their stipend. The wheat and grapes that had been recreated through the work of the hands of the recipients, was once again recreated through the joyful act of thanksgiving of the Eucharist. This in turn was given back to the congregants as the life-giving gift of the Body and Blood.

As the populace moved from a bartering-in-kind society to one governed by the use of money, so the church's offerings changed from bread and wine to coins. The church also began to use the wafers, which in turn were the same size as coins. Hence, what was offered from the bounty of the land and strength of hands was recreated and given back as the Body and Blood, sustaining not only this life-but the life to come.

As the Eucharist becomes our paradigm of stewardship, there are a number of points to ponder. The first is the very act of thanksgiving that is fundamental to the act of worship of the church. We offer what has been given to us, knowing that all that we have is itself a gift shared by a gracious giver. In the account of Deuteronomy, the whole offering of the first fruits occurs after a series of acts of God in response to those offerings. The gifts that we offer are not for the purpose of getting God's attention or in order to manipulate God to do as we might wish. They are the imitative act that informs and shapes us as we become more like God. Second, there is the fundamental expression of Eucharist in which we reach

beyond ourselves and outside of ourselves. Hence, stewardship is neither a manipulation of God nor is it a selfish act done for ourselves alone. It is something done for others. Third, the act of Eucharist itself is the act of offering ourselves. "We offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee." It is through the liturgy that we are informed and transformed into the likeness of Jesus who came on behalf of others. The whole act of Eucharist is the recalling of this act of offering, an act that empowers us to do the same.

These are some of the many points that inform us as to our stewardship. The implications of them are played out in our daily lives. These implications involve not only the amount of money that we give to the church and other helping organizations, but what we do within our environment for its protection and preservation. Today, the environment is a major concern for all of us. The way we conserve and preserve it will determine not only our future, but the future of those generations that come after us.

The use and caring for the gifts which have been given to us by a gracious giver is also stewardship. Here is the legacy of Israel in that God gives to Israel the Land. It is part of the fulfillment of the promise: A land that provides for the sustaining of the people who live upon it. This is one of the major acts of God in the story of redemption. The working out of this concern is not only for the individual but also for the community. Hence, the community of the church is much involved and concerned with the way we care for the environment. This concern should be part and parcel of the life of our parishes.

SUPPORTING THE CHURCH

The history of support of the church is one of struggle and hardship at times, and at other times opulence and decadence. Many different forms and methods of support are seen down through the ages. The first centuries of the existence of the church are replete with poverty and persecution. With Constantine came the experience of imperial protection and beneficence. Mission lands experience the poverty of cutting new ground, while some of the established areas know the security of almost inexhaustible support. The Episcopal Church in the modern age experiences the fluctuation of changing times and support.

In the history of the Episcopal Church, there have been many different ways of supporting the life of the church. Before the American Revolution the church was supported through taxes. We were an established church, which meant that we received our financial support from the government through taxation. Hence, everyone in the colony supported the local Church of England and its life even though they might be non-conformists, *i.e.*, Presbyterian, Congregational, Lutheran, or Baptist. With the end of the Revolution, the Church of England was disestablished. No longer did we receive support from the state, and neither did any other church.

The church turned to an obvious potential for income-pew rental. If a person was to be a member

of a parish, then they could rent a pew that would be theirs and theirs alone as long as the rent was paid. Of course the better the position of the pew in the nave, the higher the rental and the better the income to the church from that pew. This practice was not abolished completely in the Episcopal Church until the 1970's or 1980's, when St. Bartholomew's Church in New York City ended the practice, much to the unhappiness of some who had owned a pew for over a hundred years. From the practice of pew rental there were those who because of a social conscience sought to provide another avenue to maintain the income and work of the church.

Again in New York City, in 1846, a priest named William Augustus Muhlenberg built the Church of the Holy Communion. His intent was to provide for the worship of any and all who came to the Episcopal Church. Holy Communion became the first "free church" in the Episcopal Church. Its purpose and intent was to minister to the poor and needy. The congregation, supported by several wealthy families, quickly became a mixture of the rich and poor, a phenomenon new to the Episcopal Church. Needless to say, this free church grew and prospered in its ministry to the people of New York. Muhlenberg set the example of a new way to support the life and work of the church. Others would follow suit from the denominations as well as the Episcopal Church.

In order to provide for the life of the Holy Communion congregation, Muhlenberg began to solicit funds from individual members. Members who could afford to would make a commitment to the financial life of the church that, in turn, would be paid throughout the year. Thus the every member canvas was born. This was a new idea, which has proven to be very successful even down to the present time. In fact it was so successful that others followed suit in their religious communities as well.

The reality in all of this down through the ages is that it costs to have any type of religious institution that serves the community. When a "non-profit" or "not for profit" institution is dependent upon its constituents and those sympathetic to its cause for support it must seek support from someone. In fact, in most cases, it is totally dependent upon others for its life.

The problem that is always before such institutions is how will they be financed and by whom. There are different ways for this to take place, from the free will offerings, votive offerings, the simple sharing of goods, to organized programs such as pew rental and the every member canvas. Today there are programs of estate planning where one is encouraged to leave an amount or percentage of one's financial estate to the church. There are insurance plans where one takes out a life insurance policy on behalf of the church. The possibilities are only limited by one's imagination.

TITHING

Today in the Episcopal Church the official position on giving is the *tithe*. The concept of the tithe comes from Scripture. The difficulty with it is that people begin to view it in a legalistic perspective. Tithing means to give a tenth of what one receives back to the Giver as an expression of thanksgiving.

Not any amount is referred to as a "tithe." Hence, if a person is going to tithe, they are going to give one tenth of their income. Some will ask all kinds of questions about how to figure the amount upon which this is computed. If we must ask those kinds of questions, then we have missed the whole point of positive and constructive giving, and our understanding of stewardship is impaired.

Remember that giving is not something one does in order to make sure that one is doing the "right thing." Giving is a way of life that finds its paradigm in the Eucharist. It is the offering of our selves, our souls and bodies. Hence, it is a way of life that informs our whole view of the world.

Some may well find it very difficult to give a tenth of their income away. There are several practical points about giving that may help. First, a person may find it easier to begin by giving a smaller percentage than a tenth. Then, over time, work up to giving the full ten percent of their income. Second, when the first check written each pay period is the one we are giving away, it is much more likely that we will be able to fulfill our obligations than if we give from our "leftovers" at the end of the pay period. It is really a matter of priority, and this is what we are trying to form ourselves into becoming.

Giving in our lives is not limited to the church. There are other proper things to give to besides the church. Where the church was at one time the major source of care for the dispossessed, today there are other programs and institutions that share this responsibility. There are also other values and provisions that the church makes that are not provided for by other agencies in our society. The church provides for the spiritual welfare of people, a provision that is much needed today.

We give from our poverty, not from our abundance. This understanding of stewardship means that our giving is not just when we have enough to give. Sometimes people use the term "sacrificial giving," which means that we stretch ourselves in our giving. In the Gospels Jesus sends out the disciples in twos, without money in their pockets, without an extra coat, with only a staff and sandals. The impact of their mission is expressed in the hospitality they experienced as they went from place to place. It is sharing one's bread with another. This is the impact of stewardship. There are those who feed the poor, and spend a great deal of money doing it. This is not the same as sitting down at table with the poor and sharing our own loaf of bread in the hospitality that sees in the other our sister or brother. Hence, we give from our poverty when there is not much to share, and the fear that in sharing we may lose what little we have.

Today, given the high cost of running the institutions and the need to insure their continued upkeep of the variety of programs which they offer, a number of new methods of insuring income are becoming part of the regular life of the church. "Planned giving" is the term often used to describe the ways by which we can remember the church when we die. We can provide for the church by making specific requests in our wills as to the distribution of the assets of our estates. This can be a very important method of insuring the work of our parish and the various services that it provides-not only to

the parish household, but also in its work beyond the local setting. It is through bequests of this kind that some institutions can begin or increase an unrestricted endowment fund to assist in insuring the future life of the institutional program or start new ones. Hence the ongoing work of the church's ministry to others can be ensured.

Obviously, stewardship is not just the concern of the individual in the pew. It shapes the identity of the congregations and dioceses in which we live. One of the marks of a healthy growing church is that outreach is an essential part of its total ministry. Outreach is the work we do for those around us and beyond, whose care is our concern. It is interesting to note that growing vibrant congregations are those that count it a joy to offer assistance and care to the surrounding community.

Healthy congregations are ones who give beyond themselves. They are not "lone rangers" doing their own thing. The work is at least two-pronged. The one prong is pointed towards the immediate care of the congregation itself. This is not necessarily defined in terms of distance, but of concern. On the other hand, with the second prong they join with the diocese to reach collectively even larger and more substantial areas of concern. It seems that using the "health gauge," the healthier the congregation the more it wishes to do. Healthy congregations search out ways to enrich the life of the whole church.

An issue that often arises in the life of a diocese is the questioning of the *diocesan assessments*. These assessments are the method often used to provide for the support of the diocesan structure. For the diocese, it is essential that the congregations pay their assessments. From one perspective, it may be said that this is the price of being an Episcopal Church. Healthy congregations do not count diocesan assessments as part of their outreach giving; they see it for what it is: the cost of being an Episcopal Church. And an Episcopal Church cannot, by definition, exist by itself.

The diocese is also responsible for outreach and its stewardship of the resources that it receives. It is as important for the diocese to pay its assessment to the work of the Episcopal Church, both here and abroad, as it is for the congregations to pay their assessments to the diocese. All that has been said above in regards to the individual and parish goes for the diocese as well. Hence, the assessments of the diocese are not part of the outreach of the diocese. A diocese must also move into the arena of giving beyond itself as it provides for the needs of those for whom they are charged with caring.

FOR FURTHER READING

Ayres, Anne. *The Life and Work of William Augustus Muhlenberg*, Harper and Brothers, New York [1880].

Hall, Douglas John. *The Steward, A Biblical Symbol Come of Age*. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids [1990].