

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

“Discipleship Defined: Faithful Stewards”

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November 15, 2015

Ezekiel 34:1-16, Matthew 18:10-22

Every church has what I have referred to as the fixit guys. These are the men, and some women, who show up and fix things that are broken or simply are in need of updating. At my last congregation the fixit guys were working on some doors for a new closet when one of them said, “Hey John, do you want to go to the Restore with me?” “What’s the Restore?” “You don’t know what the Restore is!?” “No,” I replied, “I have no idea what the Restore is?” “Well jump in my truck and I will show you.” We got in his truck and headed across town. Along the way he explained what the Restore was. It was a part of the Habitat for Humanity organization where builders, contractors and home owners, when they had excess new or gently used house items such as doors, windows and cabinets would donate them to Habitat. Habitat would then put them in this immense warehouse and when people purchased them the proceeds would go to help fund the building of homes for those who could not otherwise afford decent housing. On the way back from the Restore, with two doors in the back of the pickup, the thought that came to me over and over was, what a great illustration of stewardship.

I realize that when most people think of the Restore, stewardship would not be the first word that came to mind, especially for those of us in the church. I say that because in the church when we speak of stewardship the first thing that comes to mind is money. Every year we have a stewardship drive where we ask people to carefully consider how they use the money with which God has blessed them. In a sense it is a theological annual fund drive to insure that the church has the resources it needs to fulfill its mission. At the same time we also speak of stewardship of time and talent; believing that God has given us each of those and therefore we need to figure out how God wants us to use those things in order to expand and enhance the Kingdom of God. Stewardship then it figuring out the best uses for our time, talent and treasure. All of which is indeed true, but when that becomes the extent of being faithful stewards, we miss one of the great stewardship truths of scripture and that is that God asks us to steward all of creation, including humanity.

What I mean by this is that the stewardship of our time, talent and treasure is for the express purpose of being stewards, or caretakers over humanity...or to put it another way, it is the stewardship of loving neighbor. After all this is what God has been about throughout history. God has been working to restore all of humanity back to a place where they can love God and love neighbor; where they reach their fullest potential in life; where they live into the hopes and dreams that God has for them. So what God does is take broken human beings and through the love and grace of Jesus Christ and the power of the Spirit works to restore them. This is what I meant when I said that the Restore was an amazing image of stewardship. It takes broken and castoff goods and insures that they are used in a way to enhance the lives of others. And so when we speak this morning about being faithful stewards what we need to look at is how do we become co-stewards with God in God’s work to restore humanity? The answer fortunately can be found in all three of our stories.

The first way we can be faithful stewards is to reclaim human beings. One of the commonalities of all human beings is that we have been a species that sees other members of our species as disposable. We see this in the words of Ezekiel who accuses the religious leaders of abandoning the weak and the poor. In the time of Jesus it is the widows, the orphans, the day laborers who are disposable. They are ignored and cast aside. In our own day nothing much has changed. We view foster children when they turn 18 as disposable and we toss them out on the street. We view children in poorer school districts as disposable and so do not offer them adequate resources for their education. Jesus in his story about the one sheep reminds us that no human being is disposable; that when one sheep, or as he puts it, one of these little ones, is lost, our task is to go and find them. We are to leave the other ninety-nine in the hands of the other shepherds and go and find the one that was lost. Our task is to help reclaim these people for God. Being a faithful steward of people is helping restore the potential of all people.

The second way we can be faithful stewards is to reconcile with others. Let me ask, how many of you have sent off a letter or an email that was written in the heat of the moment and which you later wish you could un-send? Any of you? I ask because when we are attacked, or as Jesus puts it, when someone sins against us, one of our first reactions is to attack back. We want to diminish the other person even as they have tried to diminish us. In other words a good defense is a good offense. And in so doing rather than helping to restore a human being we are working to tear them down. Jesus offers us an alternative to this kind of response. He tells us that we are to first go, in private and lay out our case. If that doesn't work we are to take a couple of friends and once again lay it out. If that doesn't work we are to take it to the church. The purpose of each of these steps is to try and restore another through reconciliation. It is to help the other see that they are bringing harm to those around them. Being a faithful steward of people is helping to restore relationships.

The final way we can be faithful stewards is to release others. As Jesus is telling these stories about how we are to be stewards of humanity, Peter desires a bit of clarification. If, he appears to be asking, if I am supposed to look for the lost one and work at reconciliation, how far does this extend? How many times must I forgive? Chances are that this is a question that many of us have asked ourselves at one time or another. There is that one person who just keeps tearing us down, or apart. And this is a good question for Peter because Judaism at the time had the three strike rule. You were to forgive a person three times and then no more. Jesus however, refuses to go there and instead speaks from the heart of human stewardship, that we are supposed to forgive seventy-seven times, or basically an unlimited amount. I realize that this appears to go against the previous story, but Jesus understands something central about what happens when one person sins against another; the sin traps and diminishes them both. The one sinned against is as trapped by the sin as the one who commits it. Thus when we forgive we are released to once again live fully and the other is released to become the human being God designed them to be. Being a faithful steward is helping to release ourselves and others to live into the fullness of being one created in the image of God.

As followers of Jesus Christ we are called to be faithful stewards and as such are to see the world as a giant Restore. We are to see the men and women, the boys and girls in it as those for whom Jesus Christ gave his life in order that they might be restored.