

## Growth

Joel 3:13  
Mark 4:26-32

This is a stewardship sermon. To those who automatically translate “stewardship” to “money”, please know that was the last time you will hear that word from me today. Because stewardship is the faithful use of **every** gift God gives us. Time, talent, uh, currency, **everything**. Perhaps the time has come to restate the origin of the English word, “steward”. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the gold standard source for etymologies and definitions in our language, the word steward comes from a combination of sty and warden. Thus, originally it referred to the man who took care of the pigs. Sty warden. In passing I will note that I am a Stuart. S t u a r t. My paternal grandmother was of 100% Scots descent and had documentary evidence of our lineage. It leads back to a cousin of the Stuart kings of England, James the I and II, and Charles the I and II. You might have heard about this from me sooner had those kings had any real merit. Alas, they did not, and their mother and grandmother, Mary, Queen of Scots, had less.

The Stuarts and the Stewarts (S t e w a r t) were Scots and English relatives. All of us share this linguistic root of our name that hearkens back to a pig sty. Which in a curious way leads us back on track. Stewardship means the faithful employment of our gifts, no matter how grand or small. Or smelly. Today, we take a look at what Jesus had to say about the matter. One tack he took had to do with growth. God

gives us gifts and skills and resources. God calls us to use them to produce fruit for the Realm of God. Our use of the gifts of God for the purposes of God is our stewardship. How has God gifted you? How do you use your gifts to fulfill the expectations of God?

This is actually a heavy question. God has expectations. What can we do to meet them with the resources God has granted us? Depending on our politics we might have very different opinions of the presidency of Jimmy Carter. But as a very amateur historian I will state that no man (they've all been men so far) has had a more noble and useful life after leaving office. Among his most valuable public commitments has been his work with Habitat for Humanity. Building houses. For people who could never afford them otherwise. While teaching skills (how to wield a nail gun, how to acquire insurance) the new homeowners would possibly otherwise never develop. President Carter also taught a Sunday school class at his home church for decades after leaving office. Following a medical procedure and COVID he had to take a leave of absence last year. A reporter for the Atlanta Constitution said to him, "That must have frustrated you." He replied, "Not nearly as much as having to stop building houses for people who needed them."

Many (most?) former occupants of the Oval Office have leveraged their position to maximize their wealth and place in history. Jimmy Carter has swung a hammer so people can become homeowners. I submit to you, this is real stewardship of his fame and standing. For there is so much suffering, so much dislocation, so much fear in the

world. To use whatever power, whatever platform, even if in the miniature, to provide for the human needs of people—*that* is stewardship. The lack of stewardship lurks behind the somewhat odd verse from the prophet Joel we read today. Its explanation relies on the fourth-last word, “their”. Who are “they”? They are the nations surrounding Israel in Joel's time. This man, possibly the first in the timeline of Hebrew prophets, probably lived nine hundred years before Jesus, or nearly three thousand years ago now. Yet the more things change, the more they stay the same.

These were the years of glory for Israel, of the kingships of David and Solomon, of the greatest geographic extent of Hebrew control. These were also the years of the onset of internal rot in Israel's governance, of the rise of an elite class of bureaucrats and technocrats who ran Israel without accountability to the people. Finally, these were the years of the rise of regional powers whose focus on the twin engines of commerce and military might would eventually cause Israel's decimation. ***Does this sound at all familiar?*** Joel believed in the omnipotence of God, in God's unlimited power. He believed God would judge those foreign powers for their failure to worship God and follow God's perfect law. But—and this is key to understanding all the prophets—Joel also believed that God would judge the Chosen People for their failure to follow God's will. The time had come, he saw, to reap the harvest of their wickedness. God had sent wondrous harvests. Go and bring them in while you can, Joel said, because soon your evil will prevent you from being able to do so.

Jesus also employed the image of bringing in the harvest. In Mark 4 he

addresses such a large crowd he gets into a boat and pulls out a short distance. The excellent acoustics of water enable them all to hear him as they ring the shore. Our verses contain two of his shortest known parables, of scattered seeds and the mustard seed. Note what the seed represents: the kingdom of God. Jesus has come, he implies, to help it grow. He wants workers, he implies, to help make it happen. In the scattered seeds example, he adds the curious detail that the person doing the work does not understand how it happens. But does this not fit our situation? God's ways are mysterious, we say.

How does the kingdom of God grow? How can we presume to help make it happen? For our best answer we return to the stewardship of gifts. Every Sunday school teacher blessed with the gifts of patience and goodwill helps grow the kingdom of God in the hearts and minds of children. Every singer blessed with a voice helps grow the kingdom of God in the congregation. Every seeker of justice blessed with a sense of right and wrong helps grow the kingdom of God in the community. Linda and I had the great privilege of helping to plant—**plant**, we say—a new church. I sometimes think the greatest gift I had when starting that work was naivete. I had **no idea** what I was getting into. But God formed a steering committee filled with gifted people and we did it. Or God did it through us. Because God did, that congregation has now sent literally hundreds of faithful young people into the world, and hundreds of adults—many of them formerly Roman Catholic—resumed active participation in the life of a church after years of inactivity.

Do you see how this works? It turns out not to be all that complicated. We use our tiny little gifts, our mustard seeds, and trust God to give the growth. Writing some years later, after having helped plant any number of churches, the Apostle Paul would tell the Corinthian Christians, “I planted, Apollos watered, but it was God who gave the growth.” He, Paul, started those churches. In Corinth, Apollos became the local Christian leader after Paul left town. But neither man actually could claim to have made the growth of Christianity happen. God did that. God does that.

But we do have a part to play in the growth. Airline flights begin with The Speech. You know, the instructions the flight attendant gives that we try to ignore. But I think all of us could finish this next sentence: “In the event the air masks deploy, those riding with small children should...” Yes, “put on their own masks first, and then place them on the children.” Why do they say this? According to passenger aircraft manufacturer Airbus, it is because if the cabin suddenly lost its air pressure, without those masks we lose consciousness in 18 to 30 seconds. The adult **has** to tend to him- or herself first in order to tend to the child. In a similar fashion, we need to tend to our own spirits first in order to tend to the growth of the kingdom of God. It is not selfish to grow the kingdom in our own hearts and minds, it is **necessary**.

In order to be good stewards, we must tend to our own spiritual fires. Read the Bible. Pray. Spend time with your sisters and brothers in the church. Serve creation and humanity. Worship God. Plant the seed in your own soul that God might make it grow. And then minister to the children of God seated next to you—and those who are

far, far away. Hundreds of refugees from Afghanistan have found themselves transported to southern Indiana. Camp Atterbury, near Columbus, has received these people. They do not name God as we do. They do not use the same label for their religion as we do. Yet they are children of God. As we are. And now we have an opportunity to plant a seed for them that might grow beyond any of our lifetimes.

An informal coalition of people with the same idea has formed in Terre Haute. Among them are a Roman Catholic sister of Providence at St. Mary of the Woods, the Muslim president of the local Islamic Center, an agnostic Jew and a Presbyterian minister. We have begun to gather around the idea of helping resettle at least five families of Afghani refugees in our city. We have made preliminary overtures to the not-for-profit tasked by the federal government with placing those hundreds in new homes. We have received an encouraging response; for once Terre Haute “checks all the boxes”. We have that Islamic Center. We have lower housing costs. We have a history of welcoming refugees. And there is more. We also have community advocates planting this seed and growing this shrub. How does helping people who do not worship Jesus Christ help grow his kingdom? It does by giving human beings peace, stability, hope.

Jesus taught that the kingdom of God grows. Jesus taught that his followers needed to tend to their own fires, and then to tend to those of others. The way, for once, is clear before us. Let us grow our own faith. Let us grow this church. Let us grow the kingdom by welcoming all the children of God.