

ABA Talk 2006
Stewardship Introduction

1 John 4: 19; 16b; 21

We love because God first loved us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world.

The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

The theme of this year's Annual Bishop's Appeal is from the first letter of John: *Let us love because he first loved us . . . Let us love because he first loved us.*

John's expectation that we love others is based upon what we have received from God. God loved us through the Incarnation, by offering his only Son, fully divine and fully human, for our salvation. The love of God, incarnate in Jesus, must become incarnate in us Christians also. Love, received from God, must be like God's love; it must be active. God loved us through the gift of Jesus. We receive and return that love in our discipleship.

The first principle of stewardship is to receive God's gifts with gratitude. Because we have received, we are grateful and it is out of that gratitude that we act in love. We give because we have received. *We love because God first loved us.*

John entreats us to love not only out of reciprocity, because God loved us, but also to love as God loves. God's love in us is primarily outgoing to others in imitation of God himself. On the day of judgment, John says, we may be confident because *as Christ is, so are we in this world*. By loving as God loves, through Christ, we participate in the life of God. John's language is intimate and shows our closeness with God: *God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them*. In love we are entangled with God and therefore we love the way God loves. God loved us through the gift of Jesus Christ. That same love becomes incarnate in us and the way we love.

The second principle of stewardship is to cultivate God's gifts responsibly. For us that means conforming our love to God's love by loving through the person of Jesus. God loved us widely by sending Jesus to the whole world, not just to one community or to a single family, God loved by dealing mercifully with sinners and also justly with authorities. God loved us with complete self-emptying and sacrifice. . . . *as Christ is, so are we in this world*.

Stewardship is a vision for living out our discipleship to Christ. We love because God has loved us. Love that is truly expressive of the God who sent his only Son must be effective in us in terms of loving others. We demonstrate our discipleship through the way we treat our sisters and brothers in this world.

The third principle of stewardship is to share lovingly in justice with others. To share lovingly, *we love because he first loved us*, to share in justice *because as Christ is, so are we in this world*, to share with others, *those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also*.

The word stewardship has roots in the Old English term 'stigweard'. Stig is a hall or a pen. Weard is a keeper or a guard. A Greek equivalent, which is used widely in theological discourse is 'oikonomos'. Oikos meaning house. Nomos meaning manage.

A steward manages the house and everything associated with the house. The steward has been entrusted with responsibility and authority over the house and its goods but the steward does not own the house. The steward always remains accountable to the owner. The steward manages or carries out the owner's mission for the house.

Theologically, the owner is God and the house is the church. Each of us are stewards of the church. In Patristic writings, this same term, oikonomia or stewardship, the management of the house, is used to refer to the Incarnation—the way God loves us. The stewardship of the church is intimately connected to the life of Jesus in the world. The life of the church and the life of Jesus in the world should be one and the same. The way God loves us is the foundation for the way we act as stewards of God's church. God sent the Son into the world for our salvation. As disciples of Christ we are stewards of the mystery of salvation.

This is lofty language. What does it mean to be a steward of the mystery of salvation? It means, first of all, that stewardship is not so much something we do as it is a state of being. We are stewards on account of our discipleship, our relationship to Jesus and the mystery of salvation. Secondly, this existential understanding of stewardship draws us out of ourselves and out of our individual parish commitments and puts us, through the mission of Jesus, into relationship with the universal church. This wider view is the stewardship context for the Annual Bishop's Appeal.

In their pastoral letter on stewardship the U.S. bishops explain that "stewardship in and for the parish should not be narrowly parochial." In the same way that individual Christians gather together in prayer as the body of Christ, parish communities come together at the diocesan level to form the "local church". In its ability to unite people in faith, worship, and service, the diocese is more than an administrative structure. The diocese joins parish communities together into the entity of the "local church" where they can stand united in service on a larger scale. The US bishops continue saying, "The same spirit of responsibility in which a Catholic approaches his or her parish should extend to the diocese and be expressed in essentially the same ways; generous material support and self-giving." What parishioners are doing as good stewards in their personal and family life and how they contribute to the life of their parishes must extend to the diocesan level. "Indeed," the U.S. Bishops state, "the spirit and practice of stewardship should extend to other local churches and to the universal church—to the Christian community and to one's sisters and brothers in Christ everywhere--." To be a steward of the mystery of salvation means that individuals and parishes must look beyond the needs of their own community and focus as well upon their need to further the mission of Christ in the world.

Stewardship evangelists often use the saying, *Christian stewards do not so much give to needs as have a need to give. . . Christian stewards do not so much give to needs as have a need to give.* The funds contributed to the Annual Bishop's Appeal do meet needs. The various programs and agencies supported by this campaign in turn contribute to the physical and spiritual betterment of individuals and our society. In this way, giving furthers Christ's mission of salvation. It is, however, more of a consequence of Christian giving than a motivation.

As the U.S. Bishop's Letter states, *Once one chooses to become a disciple of Jesus Christ, stewardship is not an option . . . Once one chooses to become a disciple of Jesus Christ, stewardship is not an option.* The Incarnation of God in the person of Jesus is the hinge upon which our salvation rests. God became like us so that we might recover a share in God's divinity. The challenge to become more God-like is the goal of every Christian and when we love one another, God abides in us. The principles of stewardship whether applied to a single campaign like the Annual Bishop's Appeal or to the whole of the Christian life, are God's love incarnate in us. Stewardship, managing the house, taking up Christ's mission of salvation requires a transformation of the individual and a conversion of heart among our communities. However much we might feel good for giving to needs, so much more are we motivated to give out of our discipleship and our ongoing salvation in Christ. The principles of stewardship: receiving God's gifts with gratitude, cultivating them responsibly, and sharing them lovingly and in justice with others stem directly from our discipleship, from conforming our lives to the image of God.

Explaining stewardship and explaining it's relationship to development can be like trying to nail Jello to a wall. A common caricature of stewardship is the time, talent, and treasure renewal. However, stewardship is fundamentally a disciple's response and as such requires a spiritual inner conversion. The early objectives of the stewardship office have been to introduce stewardship to the diocese as a spirituality and as a way of life. You may have seen in your parish bulletins stewardship reflections from the Sunday scriptures. These are a way of forming people in a spirituality of stewardship. A time, talent, and treasure renewal is a program that a parish might run but stewardship is not a program. It is a way of thinking about and living out our discipleship. It has often been confused with fundraising but the giving of money is only a by-product of a stewardship spirituality.

There is, as I explained above, a relationship between stewardship and giving but that relationship is based on the economy of discipleship, rather than on needs. It was only in preparing to speak to you today that I could finally make sense of the story in Matthew 26:11 where the woman in Bethany pours costly ointment from an alabaster jar over Jesus' head and the disciples criticise her saying that the money could have been given to the poor. Jesus responds saying: *the poor you will always have with you but you will not always have me.* We are never going to run out of needs. If we fed all the hungry then we would have the sick. If we cured all the sick then the needs of education or the arts or violence or loneliness would come calling. There is no shortage of needs both within and outside of our church. Neither the volume of need nor the wealth of individuals is the motivation for giving. You don't stop giving because a need is met. Rather, giving, loving, stewardship are about Jesus. It is only out of our discipleship that we have a need to give. It is out of our discipleship that we love. We

love to assimilate ourselves more closely to the image and likeness of Christ. By loving we experience the indwelling of God. Furthermore, our discipleship is lived out in communion with one another and with the local church. In this way, stewardship is different from secular development and fundraising. Stewardship provides the spiritual foundation for fund development in the Catholic church.

As you invite parishioners to participate in the Annual Bishop's Appeal, remind them that stewardship is a disciple's response. Christian stewards do not so much give to needs as need to give in response to God's love incarnate in Jesus, incarnate in them.

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