

**19<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost**  
**Giving to God: An Expression of Faith**  
**St. John's Lutheran Church**  
**Rev. Elyse Nelson Winger**  
**September 20/21, 2008**

This has been quite a week. As I listened to the news of Wall Street and our global economy, and as I read our scriptures for today, a certain song kept popping into my head, probably because I've heard it countless times on screen, on stage, in the car, from my own kids' mouths. It's a song from the Disney phenomenon, "High School Musical." It's the finale, when the whole school comes together, celebrating its unity amidst its great diversity of jocks, nerds, thespians, geeks, and skateboarders. They sing: "We're all in this together."

And I thought: it's true. But I wasn't thinking high school cliques. I was thinking *we*, God's creation, are all in *this* world together. It's always been true, but perhaps we know this now more than ever: no country, no culture, no economy stands alone. This is a fact. And here's another fact: Of this world—in which no country, culture, or economy stands alone—we are stewards. In his book, *Giving to God*, Mark Allan Powell writes that scripture's enduring witness is that we creations of the Creator are called to be stewards. It's not something we choose to be. We did not apply for the

job. But we are divinely chosen...to manage that which we do not own.

We're not masters of the universe, but we do have power...<sup>1</sup> Our choices—as stewards—matter: they can help or hinder God's vision for the world.

We are, as Luther said, co-creators with God in the stewardship of our lives, our health, our money, our friendships, *and* our witness to God's call for generosity and justice.

Powell begins this week's chapter, "An Expression of Faith," with this verse from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: "Think of us this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mercies."<sup>2</sup> Paul uses the Greek word "oikonomous" for steward. Literally, it means a "house-distributor," an overseer, a manager. "Oikonomia," or economy, is literally, the law or management of the household. And in a week when news out of Wall Street testifies to an alarming lack of good stewardship and an astounding glut of greed at work in our world, I am grateful for the big-picture reminder. Our holy scriptures understand that economies—no matter their form—are meant to steward God's creation, are meant to manage God's household, which is indeed all of creation! And we in the church have something to say about the economies at work in the world. You see, stewardship is not only about

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<sup>1</sup> See *Giving to God*, p. 28-30

<sup>2</sup> I Cor. 4:1

our personal relationships and bank accounts. It is not only about our church and its ministries. Being good stewards also includes the society and the world in which we live. Nothing is exempt. Question is: how do we do it? How do we steward God's mercies?

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard points toward an answer. Jesus, you know, told plenty of parables. And they're about many things, and have many layers of meaning. Jesus used stories that people could relate to in order to tell them about who God was and is. In Jesus' parables, God is that shepherd, that old woman, the father, and today, the landowner. In Jesus' parables, we are those missing sheep, that lost coin, the prodigal child, and today, the manager. Perhaps you were expecting that I was going to say "those grumbling workers." And, it's true, we're those, too. But, as we kick-off our Capital Campaign and keep seeking to renew our sense of stewardship, the manager's small but mighty role can't be overlooked.

Matthew uses another word for manager in his telling of Jesus' parable, and it, too, is an economic word, meaning "a trustee, administrator."<sup>3</sup> He models how we are to serve as those who own nothing, but are called to manage everything according to God's vision for all creation.

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<sup>3</sup> *eritropos*

In Jesus' day (and ours) day laborers were dime-a-dozen. They went to the marketplace to be picked up for daily work, and Jewish law mandated how workers were to be treated and paid. Deuteronomy 24: 14-15 is but one example. It says: "You shall not withhold the wages of the poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites and aliens who reside in your land or one of your towns. You shall pay them wages before sunset, because they are poor, and their livelihood depends on them." The landowner in Jesus' parable knew this. He'd have his manager pay them at the end of the day. And throughout the day, more laborers were needed, so back to the marketplace he'd go. I think about those workers waiting to be picked up...their readiness to work, but the lack of opportunity. The stress of not knowing whether they'd have a daily wage to buy food to feed their families. The feelings of worthlessness that could creep up as they got passed over, or missed the previous calls. And I imagine the relief among those workers upon getting a half days, or even a few hours' worth of work. There would at least be something. So imagine the gratitude they must have felt when the manager gave them all full days' wage...and imagine the grumbling that ensued when those earliest morning workers, pumping themselves up for a bonus, received just what they had been promised, and nothing more. I get the grumbling. Don't you? It's not "fair." Those first

workers sweated it out all day long. But you know what, those other 9, 12, 3, and 5 o'clock workers were sweating it out, too, with anxiety and stress, maybe even shame. The landowner knew that, and through his manager, responded with generosity. Turns out, God isn't "fair." God is way more than "fair." God is about restoration—about restoring people and society to the way God originally intended them to be—people in places where everyone gets their daily bread. That's God's way, that's God's vision, and what the landowner asked the manager to do, God is asking us today to also do. That's our job as stewards of God's mercies.

Now, God's mercies are, first and foremost, about the grace we have been given in and through Christ. God's mercies about the freedom we now have to serve and respond to an everlasting love higher, deeper, and stronger than we'll ever fully grasp. This parable is absolutely about this wideness of God's merciful salvation, open to the early risers and latecomers alike. But, this parable is also absolutely about how we live in *this* world together. This parable has to do with how we steward God's generosity and justice.

Did you know that there are more than three thousand verses in the Bible that express God's concern for the poor and God's response to injustice?

Jim Wallis, author and editor of the Christian magazine *Sojourners* talks about going up to Trinity Evangelical Divinity School near Chicago and with a class of seminarians taking an old Bible and cutting out every verse having to do with the poor and God's concern about economic injustice. When they were done, the Bible barely held together. It was literally a Bible full of holes.<sup>4</sup> Our job as managers of God's mercies includes acting for God's generosity and justice.

I don't the manager had it easy, by the way. I imagine that before the grumblers went to the landowner, they dished out plenty of sour grapes to him. That's in the job description. But I suspect there was also a share of reward, too, as those "last hires" served up gratitude and relief for their unexpected wage. Being a part of God's extravagant generosity is worth the plates of discontent. Being a part of God's amazing grace at work in the world is food enough.

In these weeks to come, let's be thinking of ourselves as managers of the landowner's vineyard, doing what we believe God is calling us to do in witnessing to the wideness of God's grace and mercy, generosity and justice.

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<sup>4</sup>. See Jim Wallis' *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2005, p. 212-214.

We did not apply for this job. But we have been chosen. As we hear and “Tell the Story” of our ministries at St. John’s, let’s be thinking of these ministries as places where we grow stewards of God’s mercies, as places where we together live and support each other, through God’s daily grace and hope, as good and generous managers of all that we have been given. “Bricks and mortar” are never ends, but means in supporting already vibrant and diverse ministries that are even now witnessing to God’s love and grace. How will our gifts of all kinds be generously given to the work we didn’t choose but to the work that has chosen us? We, the body of Christ, are all in this world together. Amen

*For more information on the ELCA’s understanding of economic life, check out the Social Statement adopted by the Churchwide Assembly in 1999 called “Sufficient Sustainable Livelihood for All.”*

<http://archive.elca.org/socialstatements/economiclife/>