

## Stewardship Gleanings from Lakota Friends

Psalm 84:1-7

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Recently, I filled in as a substitute teacher in a class on pastoral counseling. When asked to introduce myself, I said I am a local church pastor, educated in a seminary, a pastor whose pastoral identity was shaped on a Lakota reservation in western South Dakota. I am forever grateful for those seven years on the Great Plains. Fresh out of graduate school, I had gone there to be a great teacher, but I ended up being a humble student. I learned far more than I ever taught. As I reflect on those early years in the ministry, I see that what I learned there has everything to do with stewardship, with understanding what it means to be responsible with the gifts God has given.

In some churches, the word ‘stewardship’ has been reduced to a synonym for fund raising. Here, at South Church, we understand ‘stewardship’ as a theological term indicating a responsibility for caring for and nurturing whatever gifts God may have entrusted to us. For example, God has given us a story. We call it the Bible. To be a steward of the Bible is to explore its characters and themes and truths with sincere curiosity. God has given us a church, a family of faithful people. To be a steward of the church is to nurture all the families on Christ’s unconditional love. God has given us each a mind. To be a steward of the mind is to seek as much education as the mind can bare; formal education, street education, education in all its forms. God has given us the ability to earn money. To be a steward of our money is to allocate it in ways that reflect God’s hope for humanity.

Over the last several Sundays, we have been hearing from church people who have been stewards of their God-given gifts. We heard from two doctors who used their medical acumen on a mission trip to Honduras. We heard from a church school teacher, a Bible class attendee, a middle school youth-in-mission advisor, and an adult on a spiritual journey. It is good for us to hear these stories of men and women being stewards of God's gifts because stories bring the message home. Stewardship has a fund-raising aspect to it. After all we do have expenses and commitments and covenants to honor. The fund-raising aspect of stewardship goes well when the theological dimensions are understood.

So I will devote the rest of this sermon to a theology of stewardship learned among Lakota friends. The first principle I learned among families with names such as Deer With Horns, In The Woods, Uses the Knife, is that every living thing is sacred. Every living thing has been made by God, and therefore, I am to relate to every living thing as if God were present in that thing. Though I may be athletic, I am to relate to the less coordinated ones as sacred people. Though I may be a Milwaukee Brews fan, I am to relate to those who are Yankee or Red Sox fans as ones who are sacred, too. Though I may be a lover of the Beach Boys and the Everley Brothers and Chuck Berry, I am to relate to those who prefer 21<sup>st</sup> century bands as ones who are also sacred.

Among Lakota people there is a vocabulary that supports this theology of the sacredness of all living things. They taught me to say 'brother antelope' and 'sister squirrel', 'grandfather rock' and 'grandmother prairie'. When you believe that everything is sacred, you walk softly on the earth; you regard every creature with respect; you bring honor to yourself when you bring honor to the other.

Bringing this Lakota idea to South Church, I see that everything we do here is sacred. Every prayer shawl, every anthem, every cup of coffee, every shepherd in the living crèche, every Ladies Aid project, every visit to a shut-in, every mission partner, every Habitat for Humanity hammer, every church school lesson plan, every thoughtful gesture. We are stewards here every time we regard any living thing with caring hands. Among the Lakota, there is no such thing as some things being sacred and some profane. Nothing lies outside of the realm of God's embrace.

The second stewardship principle I learned from people with names like One Skunk, Red Cloud, and Little Wounded focuses on the buffalo. I am told that when a buffalo is killed every part of that animal is used and nothing is wasted. From the horns to the tail, from the hide to the bladder, from the tongue to the ribs, from the hooves to the tenderloin, everything has a purpose. The Lakota are the original recyclers. They understand that God didn't give them just part of the buffalo, but the whole of the buffalo. They understand they are responsible for using wisely every sinew, every tooth, every organ. I am told that when a buffalo is killed, it is time for hospitality, for the sharing of the goodness God has provided. Everyone in the village gets a taste of the stew!

Bringing this stewardship idea to South Church, I see that the buffalo is like our understanding of the church's ministry; everyone shares in some aspect of it. No one's gifts are considered unnecessary or expendable. Indeed, every talent, every commitment of time, every dollar surrendered is essential if we are to be true to our mission statement: to make the love of Christ real in the hearts and minds of all whose lives we touch.

The third stewardship principle I learned from people whose names are Owl King, White Horse, and Flying By is that nothing I possess really belongs to me. It's all on loan as long as I need it.

And when I no longer need it, I am to surrender it to someone in the community who needs it more. I was shocked by this notion. Having grown up in New England where private ownership of everything is considered the American dream, I had to wrestle with this concept that what I have been blessed to possess is really God's loan to me, to use it for awhile, even for a lifetime, and then to let go of it.

Bringing this stewardship idea to South Church, I see that there is some Lakota in all of us. When a call goes out for a stroller or a bed or a bureau, someone raises a hand and says, "I have one of those you can have!" When a call goes out for a pair of soccer shoes or for quilting materials or for a stuffed animal, someone responds, "I have one I don't need anymore!" When a call goes out for a vehicle that still runs or a TV set that still gets Sesame Street or a washing machine that still rinses, someone says, "I'm ready to let go of mine!"

When I reflect on this stewardship wisdom from the Great Plains, I see that it is not at odds with Christian Scripture or with Hebrew Torah. I see that stewardship, the nurturing of the gifts God has placed in our hands, is a universal value.

We certainly do have a budget and that budget represents our ministry and our mission. Beneath the budget lies a theology of stewardship, a way of understanding God's greatest hopes for how we use our minds and our hearts, our hands and our feet, our time and our talent and our treasure. So, on this stewardship Sunday, I remain in the greatest of hope. Amen!