"PARTNERS IN STEWARDSHIP"

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When I was in California a few weeks ago, I was watching the television one evening with some friends, and there was a special report on the news about the question of civil rights for homosexuals. At the end of the program, one of my friends, a teacher, turned around and said, "you know, I have only one thing against homosexuals, and it doesn't have anything to do with their lifestyle. What I resent about them is that they've taken a perfectly respectable adjective, the word "gay", and so mangled its meaning that you can't use it anymore. In my classes, if a girl or boy used to come in looking particularly birght and cheery, I'd say, "My don't you look gay today" and it was a compliment. Today, I'd never dare use that word."

The reason I tell you this story this morning is not because I want to talk about homosexuality, but because what has happened in American culture to the word "gay" over the past decade seems to me to be remarkably similar to the fate of a word which is part of our Christian vocabulary, and that is the word "stewardship." One can hardly use the word "stewardship" today without people seeing visions of pledge cards dancing before their eyes, or hearing the clinking of coins falling into the collection plate. Stewardship these days seems always linked to giving money to the church. And yet in its original biblical sense, the concept of stewardship had about as much to do with pledge cards as the word "gay" used to have to do with sexual preference.

Stewardship in its original Christian sense has to do with the way we are invited to be in relationship with God, the form of that relationship, the opportunities and responsibilities which that relationship brings with it. It is rooted in the very beginning of the biblical narrative, in the Genesis story of creation where God creates the man and the woman in God's image, and then gives them both authority over and responsibility for that which God has created. "Be fruitful and multiply," God instructs Adam and Eve, "and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves over the earth." I think it is important to point out that the Hebrew word translated as "dominion" here is a form of the word which we translate as "steward". In being commanded to "have dominion" over the earth, Adam and Eve were being told to act as stewards of God's estate which is the world, to act on God's behalf in the management of the divine creation. Human beings, like stewards of an earlier era, are the in-residence managers for a sometimes absent Lord. They are accountable to that Lord for the building up or the deterioration of the estate in the Lord's absence; they have the authority to act in the Lord's name in all matters except for the outright selling of the estate. And they are paid, not a wage, but a percentage of the proceeds from the estate as it produces under their tenure there.

Such is the original meaning of stewardship from a biblical and Christian perspective. It has to do with the way in which God has placed us both in relationship to Godself and in relationship to the world we inhabit. One can, and several people have, written whole volumes of books about what this stewardship menas for us in terms of the opportunities and responsibilities it offers. I was instructed to give a short sermon this morning, twelve minutes at the outside, so I only want to touch upon two very basic implications of our role as God's stewards.

The first has to do with responsibility. We are the in-residence managers of this estate and all the life and property which it contains, from our individual selves to the entire global community. It is admittedly an intimidating task, but that can not be helped. It is clear from the biblical imperative that this is the task we are given, to take care of, and manage the earth, to act responsibly in the name and behalf of God. And I think most of us are reluctant to take this responsibility too heavily upon ourselves. We would prefer that God do it alone. "God, we want to say, why don't you come here and cure my depression, or fix my marriage, or cause the church to grow, or put an end to the tragedy of starvation in the Sahel. Why don't you fix it, God." Like the man in this morning's Gospel lesson from John who had been waiting by the pool of Bethesda for 38 years, waiting for someone to put him in the pool so he could be healed, we wait for God to act in our lives and in the life of the world. And the word of God comes back to us as it did to the man by the pool, "Stand up and walk." Do it by yourself. God has given us the power to be the prime movers, responsible agents in our own healing, both physical and spiritual, and healers and rebuilders of this whole creation. We can wait all we want for God to take the initiative and act, but we will be disappointed. Not until we stand up and walk, not until we take the primary responsibility upon ourselves, will God consent to act with us.

Which brings me to the second point I would like to make about our role as stewards this morning. We can think of stewardship as the responsibility which God has given us, a burden of history and divine design; but the other side of that responsibility is the possibility of creative opportunity. God offers us the opportunity to join with God as partners in the work of creating, and re-creating, and transforming the world into the true image of the kingdom of God. I believe that this is what is meant when the writer of Genesis talks about human beings being created "in the image and likeness of God." We are obviously not made in God's physical image for God has no physical body. Instead, our likeness to God has to do with the possibility which God has given us to work with God as partners in the work of new creation which is the work of redemption. And I use the word "partners" here deliberately; God has made us, not servants or slaves who have no choice but to participate in the work of the master, but partners who may freely choose to participate in this work, partners who may decide for ourselves to make God's work our work, for our benefit as well as God's. God did not create us as pawns, to be moved about by forces outside ourselves in some divine chess game. We are blessed with the ability to say yes or no, to sit by the pool for thirty-eight years or to get up and walk. God has created us as free beings, able to respond as we choose both to God and to the creation which surrounds us.

Today is Loyalty Sunday at Pilgrim Church, and I would ask you this morning to reflect on the giving and dedication of pledges of financial support as at the most a visible sign of a much deeper and more thorough going commitment to the opportunity of stewardship which God has set before us. Giving money for the programs and operations of Pilgrim Church is a meaningless venture unless that money is given in the context of reaffirming our "yes" to the continuing work of creating and redeeming, our own lives, the corporate life of this church, and the life of the world. God will not coerce us in the giving of ourselves, our time, our talents, and our resources to God's work. We must choose for ourselves. We must choose to make God's work our work, taking upon ourselves voluntarily the image and likeness of God.

And now, in place of our usual prayer this morning, or more appropriately, as our closing prayer this morning, I would invite you to stand and reaffirm with me the covenant of this church, a covenant which for me expresses in the best sense our commitment to saying "yes" to being partners in stewardship with God.

> We are united in striving to know the will of God as taught in the Holy Scriptures, and in our purpose to walk in the ways of the Lord made known or to be made known to us. We therefore join and covenant with each other to worship, work and serve together as loyal disciples of Jesus, to live within the human community a life of righteousness and neighborly love, and to do all within our power to promote the reign of God's will in all human relations.