

Sunday October 19th

Readings

Isaiah 45:1-7

1 Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed: **2** I will go before you and level the exalted places, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron, **3** I will give you the treasures of darkness and the hoards in secret places, that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who call you by your name. **4** For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I name you, though you do not know me. **5** I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, **6** that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other. **7** I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things.

Psalm 96:1-13

1 Oh sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth! **2** Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. **3** Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples! **4** For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods. **5** For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heavens. **6** Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary. **7** Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength! **8** Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts! **9** Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness; tremble before him, all the earth! **10** Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns! Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity." **11** Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; **12** let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy **13** before the LORD, for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

1 Paul, Silas and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you. **2** We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. **3** We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. **4** For we know, brothers loved by God, that You know how we lived among you for your sake. **6** You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. **7** And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. **8** The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia--your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, **9** for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, **10** and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead--Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

Matthew 22:15-22

15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. **16** So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for

you do not regard people with partiality.**17** Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" **18** But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? **19** Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. **20** Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" **21** They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." **22** When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Father,
God's Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit:
Amen.

Stewardship. A phrase that has pretty much become a bad word in the church. It's like one of those four-letter word, just with a few more letters, but still it seems almost vulgar in our ears. A few decades ago, church's across the country had a bright idea. When budget times come around, congregations should stop using the word "giving" or "tithing" or even calling the whole process a budget, and instead we should use the word "stewardship." This would keep people from shutting down when talk about finances came around. Because the word was

new, we wouldn't be so afraid to talk about what sort of resources it takes to run the church. Not so shockingly, people soon caught on to the fact that most churches were using the word stewardship synonymously with "giving money," or perhaps more accurately, "giving more money." So, after a few years, stewardship took on the same bad connotation as telemarketers and late night QVC programming, leaving the same sort of bad tastes in our mouths, as though stewardship was just about trying to weasel your money away from you.

But don't worry. Stewardship in the eyes of Jesus, is not about taking your money. I promise. It gets worse.

Stewardship is actually telling you that the money

isn't yours in the first place. Stewardship is about taking your entire life, from your wallet to your workweek, your baggage and your body.

Stewardship for Jesus is about returning your entire self to God, and holding nothing back.

And how many times have we heard this passage from Jesus' mouth? In the language many of us grew up with, "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar and render unto God what is God's," or in this newer translation, give to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor and give to God what belongs to God. This too has taken on a sort of clichéd sentiment in our present culture. Yes, of course, we have to pay taxes, not only to the government, but apparently to

God as well. Everybody seems to want a piece of my money, my salary, my stuff, MINE. Mine mine mine.

J.R.R. Tolkien wrote the Lord of the Rings during the 1930's and 40's, much of it during WWII. The sort of evil that Tolkien speaks about is forever connected with the evils he saw as a WWI veteran and a civilian during WWII. One of the vital subplots within Tolkien's narrative is the role of the Stewards of Gondor. If you haven't read or watched the LOTR trilogy, just know that Gondor is the seat of humanity's highest king. Since the royal lineage seems lost, however, Gondor is ruled by stewards.

For this image, Tolkien draws upon the ancient understanding of stewardship. You see, a steward is one whose vocation is wrapped up in carrying out

the tasks of another person, often a king or other ruler. They live life in the stead of another. Stewards took care of the royal household, made royal decrees, and even made decisions about war and politics in the absence of the monarch. A steward's entire life is wrapped up within their acting out, their performance, of someone else's identity. Steward's identities do not belong to themselves, but to someone else.

Put this back into Jesus' context, and all of the sudden his claims seem much more radical than forking over your payroll tax. Money belongs to the emperor because it bears the emperor's image. Just like our bills and coins carry the imprints of our government, Roman currency was stamped with

Caesar's face. It was made in the image of the emperor, and so, was given value by the emperor.

And the same is true of our money, whether we like it or not. The silly paper we carry in our pockets, and the digital dollars in our bank accounts, all belong to the United States of America. They only have value here because the state deems them valuable.

Money belongs to Caesar. Money is a steward of Caesar.

But us, we were not made in the U.S. mint, nor were we shaped with Caesar in mind. We are made in the image of God, imprinted with Christ Jesus. Our value doesn't come from some governmental decree of utility, or from some stamped precious metal. Our value arises from the fact that God made

us. God chose us to be divine stewards in the world, to sit in the seat of Gondor's king and make pronouncements of grace, to usher in peace in a world of violence. Good stewardship is about remembering our identity is not our own, and so of course our money is not our own, our time is not our own, even our bodies are not our own.

You are stewards of the living God. Every last iota of who we are belongs to Christ. So, when Jesus tells us to give to God what belongs to God, he's trying to put in perspective our situation within the universe. There is a seriously cosmic intent here, a reminder about the very purpose of our existence.

Remember that, in the Garden of Eden, God gave stewardship to Adam and Even over the

animals and plants. God allowed Adam to name the animals, which itself is an act of creation. We are called to be co-creators with the Creative God who brought this world into existence, and so we must give to God what belongs to God.

Remember that, when the floodwaters rose, God came alongside Noah and entrusted the rebuilding of civilization to this one small family. Out of the evils of the old world and a flood of baptismal waters, God purified the earth and then handed it to us, God's stewards, and so we must give to God what belongs to God.

Remember that, when Abram had no future, God gave him a new name, a new family, and a new purpose, to bless all nations. Remember that,

when the Israelites suffered as slaves in Egypt, God gave them freedom and a covenant to bless the world. Remember that, when Israelites suffered again as exiles in Babylon, God brought them home to rebuilt Jerusalem. God delivers us from desperation into blessing, from despair to promise, and so we must give to God what belongs to God.

We are stewards because at every juncture of history, when it seemed we had made an irredeemable mess of our lives and all creation, God intervened and reclaimed us as not only good creations, but as God's children, as stewards of God's goodness. We are stewards because our identities are wrapped up in the person and presence of Jesus. Anything good that we have,

anything true that we know, anything right that we do, is not our own, but rather comes to us as the gracious gift of God. So render unto Caesar what is Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God.

And so, make no mistake here. There is nothing within us that doesn't belong to God. Christ made sure of that. To establish us as stewards and children, God intervened on the cross and took not only the decent parts of humanity, but the entirely indecent, the deceptive, the shallow, the hateful, the spiteful, the lame, the fearful, the angry, the shameful – all things that marred us, that prevented us from becoming good stewards – and Christ took them to the cross. Christ buried our sin, our failure, our incompetency, and on the third day, when he rose,

Jesus left all that in the grave. We are stewards of God, and everything we have belongs to God because the only good life we now live is one indebted to Jesus.

So, yes, Jesus says to give, but he does not do this as one unacquainted with giving. Jesus asks for our obedience, for our tithes and our time. But remember that Jesus tithed with his body. Remember that the God of the universe has given an eternity of time to redeeming the world from our sinfulness. Remember that Jesus was the first to be obedient, and the only one whose obedience required death on a cross.

So, it is by his obedience that we may become obedient. It is by his tithe that we may tithe. It is by his time that we now have an eternity of life to give

back to God what belongs to God. Jesus shows us the way of stewardship, and so we might become the kind of stewards that sacrifice ourselves because he first showed us the way of sacrifice.

So stewardship is not a bad word, and it is not only about money. But it's a hard word because stewardship is the constant reminder that we are not our own. Our entire lives belong to Christ, and so to give to God what belongs to God means that that our entire lives, from our wallets to our workweek, our baggage and our very bodies, cannot be spent on ourselves. The image of stewardship we have in Jesus is one who spent all things, all of himself, to his very last breath, on others. On us. So what can we do now? How do we live a life of stewardship?

Good stewards give. Not just to the church, and not just money. Good stewards work in the community. Good stewards support charities, give to the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless. Good stewards live life in the selfless image of Jesus. Good stewards forgive.

For us, at CLC, what might this mean? The construction of a campus ministry to bless another community entirely is a great start. A commitment to Healer's Hands, a ministry of healing and wellness, is a good start. A commitment to a building that is accessible to all people of all abilities is a good start.

But part of being a good steward is pushing into the uncomfortable, into those areas that challenge us, that force us outside of ourselves, to sacrifice for

the sake of others. Whatever that looks like, we will learn to be good stewards together. Amen.