

“A Steward’s Joy” GPPC 11-3-19
Psalm 24:1, 1 Chron. 29:10-13, Mal. 3:6-10, 2 Cor. 9:6-15

When Beth and I moved from Ohio to return the land of my birth, we also re-entered the Holy Land for college basketball. Now I’m aware that other (lesser) states, such as Indiana, Kentucky, and California, have proud traditions of college basketball as well. But, as sports experts will tell you, the greatest rivalry in college basketball is Duke/Carolina. Many of you know why. The schools are located about 10 miles apart (eight miles as the crow flies). They recruit the same top level players. In their 251 meetings, Carolina has won 139 games and Duke 112. They each have won multiple national championships. And almost every time they play, one (usually both) teams are ranked in the top twenty in the country. Even during the rare times when one team is having a relatively poor season, that team still might pull off an incredible upset of the other.

And boy do the schools have fans. You may remember that the word “fan” is a shortened version of the word “fanatic.” And that fits the rivalry. Do you think monsoon rains would keep a real fan away from

Jeff Paschal

watching the rivalry? What about high ticket prices? The coaches making occasional decisions fans disagreed with it? Would that keep the real fans away? Surely you jest. A number of Duke students actually camp out in tents in “Krzyzewskiville” for entire semesters just to get the chance to attend the Duke/Carolina basketball games when they are on the campus. That, my friends, is dedication.

Why do these fans, these fanatics, do what they do to support their teams? Why do they do it?

Because it is important to them. And why is it important to them? Maybe because their devotion to their team connects them to something greater, a tradition, an emphasis on excellence, an expectation of teamwork and self-sacrifice for a greater goal than individual comfort or individual glory.

On this Sunday when we think about stewardship in preparation for next Sunday’s stewardship dedication and we think about the saints who’ve gone ahead of us in faith, I wonder if Duke/Carolina might be a playful *backboard* for *bouncing* some serious theology around.

Jeff Paschal

You could mention others, but today we'll lift up four elements, the "four corners" of stewardship.

First corner. The Psalmist says, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it."

As Christians, we begin with the countercultural notion that the world is *not* ultimately about you and me, our wants, our whims, and our opinions. The world is finally about God, because the world, everything in it--the soil, the air, the plants, the animals, the people--everything belongs to God. Yes, you and I get to use and care for the planet for a short time. Yes, you and I get to enjoy and care for our lives and our bodies for a time. But everything and everyone belongs to God. And everything and everyone returns to God. So God expects us to be careful and wise with God's creation, because we are not the owners of creation. We are merely stewards, caretakers of what belongs to God.

Second corner. In 1 Chronicles 29:10-13 we hear King David speaking to the gathered assembly in worship. He offers a prayer. "Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of our ancestor Israel, forever and ever. Yours, O Lord, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory,

Jeff Paschal

and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours...” So David is repeating the theme we’ve heard from the Psalmist—everything belongs to God.

But David goes a step further. He says, “And now, our God, we give thanks to you and praise your glorious name.” In other words, stewardship is an act of worship. Stewardship is not primarily about meeting the church budget, as important as that is. When we give back to God, we are giving as part of worship. Stewardship is not just about “paying the church’s bills;” stewardship is about worship of God. And one of the ways we worship God is with our glad and thankful stewardship.

Third corner--Malachi 3:6-10. Speaking through the prophet, God has a word with Israel. And God is angry. “Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, ‘How are we robbing you?’ In your tithes and offerings! You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me—the whole nation of you! Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test...see if I

Jeff Paschal

will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.”

Wow! How do we make sense of these furious words and how might they actually be something positive for us today?

Sometimes we hear people say, “I feel judged when I come to church.” Or, “I feel judged when I read the Bible.”

Well, the Bible itself gives us good news and bad news. Which do you want to hear first? We’re going with deferred gratification—bad news first.

The bad news is that every single person on the earth is indeed judged. It really does matter how we live our lives—our attitudes, words, and deeds (or lack of deeds). God is keeping track. And there will come a day when each of us will stand before God to give an account of how we used the gift of our lives. God will see through our excuses. We will not be able to blame others for our choices. We should not kid ourselves otherwise.

And according to 2 Peter 3:1 those of us who are teachers of the faith will be judged with greater strictness than other Christians. Yikes!

Jeff Paschal

Now the good news. We are judged by the God we know in Jesus Christ. We are judged by God who loves us with utterly clear and fair judgment and with absolutely unstoppable mercy. We are judged by God who gave God's Son, God's very self, on the cross in forgiveness of our sins. We are judged by God who loves us more than we can ever understand or even imagine.

And more good news is that the judgment of God means that our lives actually matter. It makes a difference how we live. Scripture tells us that somehow, in some mysterious way, our lives count in the grand scheme of things. And though we do not earn our way into heaven or earn God's love, still when we say or do something good *that* matters.

So when we hear God's angry language in Malachi, this is our loving and Divine Parent's warning to us, God's children. If we are stingy with God, misers with our time, abilities, and money, then we are robbing God. And when we are robbing God we are actually robbing ourselves, the church, and the world. We are missing out on the overflowing blessings of being a greater part of God's goodness and love at work in the universe.

Jeff Paschal

Now maybe you are thinking, “I’m only going to give back generously to God of my time, abilities, and money, *if* things are going the way *I* like in the church.” Unfortunately, this is a *customer mentality*. “I pay my money, and I expect a certain product in return. And if I don’t get what I want, then I won’t pay.”

As someone said to another preacher, “I didn’t really like worship today.” And the preacher answered, “That’s okay. We weren’t worshipping you.”

What’s needed from followers of Jesus Christ is a *discipleship mentality*. Like a family, we recognize our *own* flaws as well as the flaws of others, and we respond with patience, forgiveness, and commitment to Christ and the church. A *discipleship mentality* means giving out of gratitude, out of the desire to share in what God is doing in the world, out of the responsibility that we have as Christians to care for the church.

It’s like going to a potluck meal. We all bring something to share. Some people are able to bring more than others, but everybody is expected to bring something. Stewardship is a privilege, not a chore. It’s

Jeff Paschal

a response to God's overflowing goodness, not a way to coerce others.

It's a glad sharing of gifts.

Fourth corner. In 2 Corinthians 9:6-15 Paul says, "The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."

Now Paul is not like one of those TV prosperity gospel preachers who promises if you give a bunch of money to his or her ministry God will drop down boatloads of money on you. Paul is not that.

Instead, he says generous giving from our heart not only helps the church and the world but it puts joy into our own hearts. Generous stewardship of our time, abilities, and money is one way that God gives us joy, that deep sense of satisfaction we know as God lives and moves in each of us, disciples of Christ.

How much should you and I give? Each of us should decide on our own after reflection and prayer. The biblical tithe is 10 percent, a really good goal that some of our members are able to meet. If you are not

Jeff Paschal

there yet, consider trying to increase 1 percent a year. Our giving should pinch us some, make us live more simply, without becoming a terrible burden.

What about our congregation's annual budget? Well, the great news is that we have all the money we need. The challenging news is that the money is in the bank accounts of our members waiting to be given as a faithful response to God's abundance. Will we give faithfully and joyfully?

Over the last eight years, Guilford Park has usually finished the year with a balanced budget or with a slight surplus or slight deficit. However, that balanced budget has largely been accomplished because we have cut staffing, especially staffing an associate pastor who might help us grow not only spiritually but numerically as a church. I wonder if we are falling behind what we might be as church because we are not giving to our full potential, giving to an extent that truly shows our gratitude and commitment to Christ. After all, Christ does not need fans. Christ needs disciples who follow.

Jeff Paschal

And as we think about the saints, those disciples who have gone ahead of us, who by God's grace built and expanded this church, I wonder if they are watching and urging us on from heaven. I wonder if they join with God and rejoice when they see us feeding the hungry, hear the children singing in worship, mentor at-risk boys and girls, do mission trips to D.C., around the country, and in other countries, give voice to the voiceless, study the Bible and the world, laugh in fellowship, serve with gladness. I wonder if the saints watch us and urge us on, urge us on to be committed joyful stewards of the life and the church God has placed into our care for a short time.

Let us be the joyful stewards God has created and called us to be, through Christ our Lord. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal