

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for Stewardship Dedication Sunday, November 14, 2010
Lessons: Isaiah 22:15-21 and John 15:9-17

THE LIFE AND OUTLOOK OF THE STEWARD

We do not know much about the government official named Shevna who brings upon himself the judgment of God proclaimed by the prophet. Biblical commentators struggle to specify his offenses, but this morning we need to see only that he is a steward who has failed in his stewardship but seems quite proud of his achievements. Shevna has had a tomb carved for himself out of the rock in a high and prominent place as though he were someone of importance in the people's history when in God eyes he is not. A servant of King Hezekiah, Shevna is "master of the household," an administrator of the king's palace who apparently is proud of the "splendid chariots" he has either amassed or, more likely, secured as a promise from the king of Egypt to defend Jerusalem against Assyria, the dominant power of the time. The support from Egypt will not materialize, and Shevna will learn that he has put his trust in the wrong place. The prophet warns:

Alas for those who go down to Egypt for help
and who rely on horses,
who trust in chariots because they are many
and horsemen because they are very strong,
but do not look to the Holy One of Israel
or consult the LORD!

The office of steward was one of responsibility. The steward was a decision-maker, who supervised other servants and acted in place of the owner, representing the owner's interests and dealing with others on the owner's behalf. To the proud and quarrelsome Corinthians, Paul speaks of himself and the other apostles as "servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God" who must prove trustworthy because they do not represent themselves or seek to gratify their own egos.

The principal duty of a steward is to know the mind of the master and act accordingly in the master's true interests. Success is failure if the steward succeeds in a way that does not suit the motives, desires, and goals of the master. Service in the master's name must be done in the master's way or success brings shame. To Shevna, the prophet says, "O you disgrace to your master's house!"

Over the centuries of Christianity, much has been said and done in Jesus' name that has been faithful to him or, if not completely faithful then done in a spirit of striving to be faithful to him and his way of the cross. Jesus cared nothing for majesty, splendor, or power to control others. He took the form of a servant and followed the path of self-giving love to restore the lost and redeem the unworthy. But over those same centuries, Christianity also took power and became Christendom, which means the kingdom of Christ but was really the empire of the church. The humble Servant Christ who was Jesus became an embarrassment to the princes of the church, and so they distorted very name "servant" into a term for regal authority, pomp, and power. The servants of God were tempted to see themselves as invested with a divine majesty that had nothing in common with Jesus of Nazareth, who gave himself willingly to suffering, humiliation, and death for the sake of others.

Christendom has finally ended, and its remnants are falling into decay. Actual Christendom was a European thing, but here in America the mainline churches enjoyed a kind of cultural establishment which made Christian the thing to be and Christianity the presumed, though never official, religion of the land. Mainline Christianity is now being humiliated. In our own Presbytery of West Jersey, half our churches now have one hundred members or fewer and little hope of supporting a full time pastorate. Even the country's largest Protestant denomination has now admitted to having only about half the members it formerly reported, and as you know, Catholic churches are being merged here in our county. Many who remain on church membership rolls take no part in church life, ministry, mission, or even worship, and some no longer consider themselves church members at all.

Am I painting a picture of gloom and doom? No, I am describing the reality in which we presently find ourselves. What we do in response to that reality is our choice. Christianity can play Shevna immortalizing its former glory in the dead stone of empty church buildings, or it can swallow its pride and accept the mantel of the servant from its Servant Redeemer, Jesus, who gave himself for others. We have the opportunity right now to become the kind of churches Christ calls us to be. If we seek the way of Jesus, keep learning it, and keep following it, then we can become people he calls his friends in the world who know his mind, share his motives, and work in his way toward his goals.

Jesus never needed proud churches, let alone a Christendom that spread itself by war and wielded authority by intimidating people with fear of eternal punishment. But preaching fear has never been our temptation. For us, danger lies not in fear tactics or regimentation but rather in the convenience of being a church casually. In my youth, when the churches had far more members, there were always enough people to make church activities work even if only the mainline standard of one-third showed up. As numbers have decreased, the presence and participation of those who care has grown in necessity. I remember when church schools had departments with more than one class to a grade, and our youth group in

my teens could easily have thirty kids present from just three school grades even when the majority stayed home that night. So, it was easy to have all the activities we wanted because we had people to spare. Those days are gone, but where does that fact leave us?

I see two bad choices. One is denial in which a church simply carries on as though nothing has changed. The other is desperation in which churches scramble to provide entertainments in a society with too many already, to pump up worship into an experience of getting high on Jesus, to offer mission trips that are rather like exotic vacations, or to push guilt and duty upon reluctant members. None of those desperate moves will work here, for which I am thankful. As a Visioning Team, we are not looking for fixes that will bring back the past or make First Pres the newest attraction. We are seeking rather to discern what Jesus Christ calls us to be and to do in this time and place where we are gathered in his name. Jesus started with just twelve, one of whom proved unfaithful. God will not fail, and whatever the future forms of Christ's church and its ministry may be, we are here now seeking to be faithful with the grace, the redemptive love, Jesus has entrusted to our stewardship. The question is not, "What will work?" but, "How can we open our hearts and extend our hands with God's grace to the people and communities around us?"

A steward does not serve slavishly but willingly and even joyously, with dignity that has nothing to do with pomp or prestige and with hope that extends far beyond prospects we can calculate. Jesus renames his servants his *friends* because they know his mind, sharing his trust in God, his desires for this world and its people, and his commitment to the triumph of God's love. They know the way of self-giving love and its humble power to change lives.

Today we recommit ourselves to stewardship, not of the church as it is or has been, but of the faith, hope, and love Jesus Christ entrusts to our care. The future belongs to him and so do we. Onward, then, we go, expecting life and looking forward to every tomorrow God has in mind for us — not because we have no struggles, no problems, no hurts, no cares, but because we trust the One who gives light in the darkness, brings life out of what seems dead, and refuses to let us end in futility. We have work to do, fun to share, hope to spread, and lives to feed (and not just our own). So we dedicate, not just our pledges but ourselves, to life, to the new day, to the triumph of God's love! May it be for us to hear Jesus say:

I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last

Amen.