

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for November 13, 2011
Lessons: Proverbs 3:1-12 and John 3:1-10

AS WE FOLLOW, THE PROMISE GROWS

We are stewards of many things entrusted to our care, not only by those who came this way before us, but also and much more so by Jesus Christ. In our shared humanity, we are stewards of this earth God created and loves. Gladly we affirm, “The earth is the LORD’s in all its fulness, the world and all that dwell in it!” Against the tide of greed and exploitation, we serve the revealed truth that this earth is not a warehouse of resources to consume until we reduce it to a great trash heap. As the God-given home of all its creatures, the earth is ours to care for and protect even as it provides for our needs from its abundance. Humanity has looked upon that abundance but seen only scarcity and has fought continuously over what economists call scarce resources. We dump plenty of food as garbage, but mostly we do not try to find ways and means for all to have sufficient food because our desire is for personal gain or convenience, not for communities in which all may thrive.

Jesus has told us that the person who is faithful in small matters will prove faithful in greater matters as well. God has appointed us to be stewards of the ways and means of life, not the outcomes. I cannot emphasize that point enough. Outcomes belong to God and lie beyond our sight. Into our hands God has placed the ways and means: the ways in which people should be treated, the means of grace by which we open ourselves to God’s Spirit and the demands of our shared humanity as children of God. We cannot foresee the outcomes of our actions. We can do only what faithfulness and compassion require when we make choices. But sin whispers in our ears that we must hang on to what we think we have and get what we think we want, and if we listen to sin’s whisperings, we sacrifice faithfulness at the moment of choice to protect the outcomes we desire. The current tragedy at Penn State reveals painfully what happens in countless ways when good people choose to safeguard what they think they have or get what they envision for their lives at the expense of faithfulness, justice, and compassion in the choices that confront them.

We don’t get to manage life’s outcomes. That’s the wisdom in Proverbs when the sage tells his child:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.
In all your ways acknowledge [your covenant God],

and [God] will make straight your paths.
Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.

If we measure our choices by the outcomes we desire – at the expense of faithfulness, justice, and compassion – we will fall into evil. Of course, we plan for small outcomes every day. I don't just hop into the car and start driving with no destination in mind. I may very well know what I hope will come out of a church meeting, but how am I willing to treat people and their concerns to get what I desire? "Trust in the LORD" does not mean I am to count on God to get me what I want; it means I am to entrust to God with all my will and desire the outcomes of my choices and actions so that humility not pride, faithfulness not greed, and compassion not indifference will guide those choices and those actions.

We Americans are known to be a pragmatic people who care more for practical effectiveness than for theory, but pragmatism has its pitfalls as well as its advantages, and we fall into the deepest and dirtiest of practicality's pits when we disregard the rights, needs, and lives of people not important to our desired outcomes. That's when the poor child in the locker room shower doesn't matter enough. That's when the employee with decades of faithful service becomes expendable. That's when dirty tricks are played and foul laws passed to suppress the votes of the poor. That's what makes wage theft from those afraid to complain a national disgrace. That's when appearances become more important than people. And that's when trust, both personal and public, is betrayed.

We are stewards of many things and yet, most truly, only one: the living truth of God's redemptive love for this world. Jesus embodied and fulfilled that love, and our stewardship comes from belonging with him to God. Jesus says we must be born from above, meaning we must be brought by the love and mercy of God into the process of receiving newness of life and learning to live it as new people – no longer isolated individuals or groups in conflict with each other, but now daughters and sons of God in faith's union with God's own Son. This is the famous and sometimes infamous "born again" passage which itself has been corrupted into an outcome so that so-called "born-again Christians" may take pride in distinguishing themselves from others not born-again, rather than drawing humility and strength from an ongoing process in which we learn day by day to respond to life's situations and choices with faith, hope, and compassion rather than fear, greed, and self-serving. Our physical growth as persons is not completed at birth; neither is our spiritual transformation by the grace of God completed in a "born-again" experience.

Through Jesus, God has greatly enlarged our stewardship, much as through the prophets God enlarged the calling of Israel and the significance of being God's chosen people. We are stewards of the gospel, the good news of hope and deliverance for all people.

We are stewards of that which is here in its inception and yet to come in its fullness – that which Jesus calls the kingdom or reign of God, which the apostle Paul presents as the triumph of God’s grace and as God’s new creation, and which the tradition of John pictures in Revelation as a new heaven and a new earth beyond the grasp of death and grief, beyond the reach of all that hurts and destroys.

That’s a tremendous stewardship, but because it is so big, here especially we need to keep reminding ourselves that we do not own and cannot achieve the outcome. Jesus has given us only the attitudes, ways, and humble means of the kingdom. We cannot bring about the kingdom of God by any form of conquest, neither military nor ideological nor even missionary. He has appointed us to serve, not to rule, and to persuade gently and respectfully, not to coerce.

Jesus has enlarged our stewardship because God always keeps enlarging the promise. It’s not only about increased responsibility which would seem an overwhelming burden, as though God’s new creation might somehow depend upon our effectiveness or our future as churches. No, we are to be the leaven in this world that quietly works its way through the whole loaf in seemingly powerless ways of caring, serving, making justice happen for people forgotten in the crowd, and sharing the grace and hope God gives us. The promise does keep growing as we take steps toward receiving it. Abraham and Sarah were promised a son they could not have, then, as they took steps in faith, an uncountable multitude of descendants, and a land for those descendants to inhabit and enjoy. God led Israel into the land promised, but even then the people knew their life in that land held more promise and not only for them but for all the nations and peoples of earth. It is not only the Bible’s ancient story but can be also our present experience and our life story that as we entrust ourselves and our choices to the way of Jesus Christ, the promise will keep growing.

Small faith begets greater faith, and entrusting to God our immediate needs and distresses opens the way for greater and deeper grace in our lives. Faith is a process not a possession. We don’t so much “have” faith as we choose to practice it. And along the way, we will find our own desires replaced by God’s desires for us and for the world with which we interact, and we will come to think they really are our own desires – because, by the workings of what we call God’s grace, they will indeed have become our own desires. God is not content to have our obedience, as though we were slaves; Jesus calls our wills and desires back into harmony with God’s own. Our lives can resonate with God’s justice and compassion. The promise keeps growing as faith strengthens our wills to embrace it. Small steps toward entrusting our lives to God’s love and mercy are good – it’s a life, not a race. The outcomes belong to God. Choices for faithfulness, hope, humility, justice, peacemaking, and compassion are given to us day by day. We are stewards. Amen.