

WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH/NOVEMBER 1, 2009

STEWARDS ALL/GENESIS 1:26-31

REV. DR. LYNN CHEYNEY

I. THE TEXT: Our text this morning takes us back to the very beginning – to the words of creation... words that certainly do not give us the science of “how” things came to be, rather words that speak to the “why is there something rather than nothing?” questions, the “Why are we here?” questions that reside in the human heart. Hear the word of God... the story of day #6 of creation.

²⁶Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”²⁷ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.²⁸ God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, 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 upon the earth.”

²⁹God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.³⁰ And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so.

II. PRAYER God of grace and God of mercy, pour your Spirit upon us now as we seek to hear your voice and discern your heart. Renew not only our minds but show us who you want us to be and how you want us to live – for we are yours. Amen.

III. OPENING DAY...

It’s been a rollercoaster. And I am not referring to the transition we’ve been in together as a church family... rather it is the state of the economy that has left most of us feeling whiplash. We stand by, incredulous, as the stock market plunges, rises, plunges, rises, etc. etc. etc. Skyrocketing budget deficits, bailouts galore, expensive protracted war... we fret over the debt we are leaving our children. Shrinking retirement accounts, the rising costs of everything, dwindling college funds. Home values plummet, not-for-profits struggle as giving money away, even for good causes, feels risky. We’re all a bit jittery about the whole mess. We all feel it – like this is a place we’ve never been before and we are not altogether sure we’ll be able to find our way home. Now, aren’t you glad you came to worship this morning?

And on top of the jitters out there, there are some jitters in here as we step this morning into day one of stewardship season. That part of the Church year that comes around as regularly as the season of Lent and Easter, the season of Advent and Christmas... though generally met with far less enthusiasm. Truth be known, as we step into Stewardship Season, Sessions and Stewardship Committees all across the country are fretting this year – given economic realities, will there be enough to do what we believe God is calling us to do? And congregations brace for what to many feels like the annual sales pitch – I suspect you probably get a bit anxious about it too. You know the pledge card will soon arrive in your

mailbox. But that's where we are this very morning: *Opening day of Stewardship Season*.

IV. STEWARDSHIP SEASON

And yet our Scripture this morning seems to suggest that the real opening day for Stewardship Season took place on day six of creation, when God built into our very identity the role of steward, caretaker. Hear the ancient text again – “*God blessed [the human creatures], and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, 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 upon the earth.’*” Our collective abuse of the terms “subdue” and “have dominion” has been more than adequately documented. Frequently overlooked is the parallel creation story of Genesis 2 in which we are instructed to “till” and “keep” the garden God has entrusted to us. The word we translate as “keep” (*shamar*) is better rendered as “to exercise great care over.” We are the caretakers of God’s garden. In other words, if we are not planning for the very best for our world, we are missing the mark, we are out-of-sorts with our very nature. Stewardship, the call to care for our world and all in it, is in humanity’s DNA.

Thus, today is **not** really opening day – opening day of stewardship season was day 6 of creation, day 1 of humanity.

And we think baseball season lasts a long time! ...

From the get-go, God said to the human creation, “Welcome to the world – I have a place for you on my team: the game is called dominion over the earth – your position will be: Steward.” We’ve learned a few other words for steward over the years – caretaker, manager, administrator, trustee – no matter the word you choose, the calling is the same... and as a concept it is really pretty simple. As keepers, caretakers, managers, stewards, administrators, trustees – we are responsible for what belongs to someone else. And in this case, what belongs to someone else happens to be everything – it all belongs to God. From Psalm 24 – “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it.” There’s been no transfer of ownership – we are temporary residents of a planet whose rightful owner is God. We spend God’s time, we live in God’s homes, raise God’s children, use God’s talents, tend God’s church... we spend God’s money, care for bodies that belong to God, we enjoy God’s earth – God holds title to it all – but has entrusted it all to us to steward – to care for – and to enjoy. It is not a matter of **whether** we **are** stewards – by virtue of our existence, **all of us** are stewards. The question is – are we good ones... or mediocre ones... perhaps even awful stewards?

Note that on day 6 of creation, money hadn’t yet been invented. Yet in the minds of so many in the modern church when we hear the word stewardship, our minds rocket to money. Stewardship “season” makes us groan. In this difficult year with belt tightening on everyone’s mind, I’m sure most would prefer that stewardship “season” be cancelled. But, stewardship is not synonymous with finances. We tend to reduce it to making – be it reluctantly or gladly – a donation. But as Reinhold Niebuhr wrote in the *Christian Century* some 80 years ago, “Philanthropy is not stewardship.” Philanthropy is indeed a good thing, even a necessary thing, but for the Christian, it is only one aspect of our stewardship, our commitment to a life of using all of God’s on-loan gifts well.

While we are the stewards God has created us to be, stewardship certainly involves, but is so much more than our personal budgets. It affects every aspect of our lives – not a day goes by that we are not faced with stewarding decisions. Everything from what sort of car do we drive, to what does today’s agenda hold, to what will I eat for dinner, to what will I do with the

kids when I get home from work, to how will I vote come election time? Almost everything we do, almost every decision we make in some way relates to our job description as steward – caretaker of what belongs to God. Philosophy professor Gregory Coulter (St. Thomas University, MN) puts it this way – “Stewardship is not something we can put on or take off as the seasons change. Stewardship, like faith, must be woven into the fabric of our lives.” Indeed, there is no such thing as “stewardship season” – we are stewards every day, all day; our stewardship is lifelong.

V. OWNERSHIP OR STEWARDSHIP?

While our God-given job description is steward, our culture pushes a different identity – owner. We live, not in a “stewardship” but in an “ownership” world. Leafing through the New Yorker or plopped on the sofa in front of the t.v., when was the last time you saw an ad that affirmed and supported your identity as a steward? Outsell, Inc. claims that over 400 billion dollars were spent last year to convince you and me that our primary identity is that of purchaser, consumer, owner. The ownership and stewardship models are radically different and they land us in polar opposite places in terms of the sort of world and lives they create. The two job descriptions are fundamentally in conflict with one another. Let me try to distinguish one job description from the other:

The owner says... it's mine.

- The steward says... it is God's.

Owners ask... what do I want?

- Stewards ask... what does God desire?

The owner... keeps

- The steward... gives

The owner... expects service

- The steward... anticipates serving

Owners... live with a sense of entitlement

- Stewards... with a sense of gratitude

Owners crave...

- Stewards... are content

Owners want to have

- Stewards want to enjoy

Owners... are trapped by the here and now

- Stewards... store up treasure in heaven.

Two very different world views – and the key question is this – Are we caring, stewarding, managing our time, our bodies, the world, our talents, our things, our children, our money as though they are ours?... or as though they belong to God?

Ours is an “ownership” world – yet as followers of Jesus Christ we are called down a different path. The path of faithful stewarding – the careful, responsible, **loving** management of all that God has put in our care.

VI. A METAPHOR

At their class reunion, a group of graduates, well established in their careers visited a retired, beloved university professor. As they gathered in his living room, the conversation turned to complaints about stress in their work and lives, about how little time they had to enjoy the good life they'd worked so hard to attain. The professor excused himself, went into the kitchen and returned a few minutes later with a large pot of hot chocolate and an assortment of cups – porcelain, glass, crystal, some plain looking, others exquisite, old, new, some cheap, others expensive– telling them to help themselves to the hot chocolate.

When they all had a cup of hot chocolate in hand, the professor said: “Notice that all the nice looking expensive cups were taken – you left the plain and cheap ones on the tray. While it is normal for you to want the best for yourselves, I suspect that is also the source of your problems and stress. The cup that you’re drinking from adds nothing to the quality of the hot chocolate. In most cases it is just more expensive and in some cases even hides what we drink. What all of you really wanted was the hot chocolate and conversation, not the cup; but you consciously reached for the best cups.” He finished, “Life is like the hot chocolate; your job, money and position in society are the cups. They are simply tools that hold and contain life. The cup you have does not define, or change the quality of life you have. Sometimes, by concentrating so much on the cup, you miss the hot chocolate.”

Owners focus on the cup, stewards enjoy the hot chocolate.

VII. IDENTITY QUESTIONS

This morning we begin an intentional season of reflecting on what, for every Christian, are critical questions... do we understand ourselves as owners of what belongs to us? Or as stewards of all that belongs to God? The real question is not, how much of what is mine do I give? Rather the question is, how much of what is God’s will I keep for myself? We are, in fact, stewards – what sort of stewards we will choose to be? It is a season for thinking about our life-long identity as authentic human beings, as caretakers... not simply of the money God has enabled us to earn, but of the talents God has entrusted us with to enjoy and to use, the time God has created for us to share, the bodies God has loaned us to care for, the good earth God has provided as our temporary home.

In just a few moments we come to the Supper of our Lord... the supreme steward... who reveals to us the struggle, the danger, the power and the life-giving freedom of living out who we truly are. In him we see how best to live our one and only life; how to love and to risk giving our lives away; how not to be trapped in owning, but rather how to be free to live.

VIII. PRAYER: Lord, thank you for the privilege of caring for all that belongs to you – may we aspire to be good stewards – that the world might look and be more the one you intend. We pray in the name of Christ, who has shown us the way.

AMEN AND AMEN.