

Stewards of Grace

A. Stephen Van Kuiken
Community Congregational U.C.C.
Pullman, WA
November 8, 2020

Ancient Witness: 1 Peter 4:7-11

There's a story about two moose hunters in Maine who chartered a light airplane to carry them deep into the woods where they thought they had the greatest chance of bagging a moose. As the pilot landed, he warned the hunters, "I will return in two days, but my plane only has the power to carry the three of us plus one medium sized animal."

The hunt was successful beyond their expectations, however, and when the pilot came back for them two days later, the hunters crammed two large prize moose into the passenger seats, stretching their carcasses across their laps.

The plane lumbered down the airstrip and laboriously got airborne, but the weight of the animals proved too much. Try as he might, the pilot was unable to clear a ridge beyond the airstrip and the plane crashed into some trees. Fortunately for the three men, the two moose cushioned their fall, and amid the destruction and carnage, they somehow remained alive.

"Where are we?" asked one of the hunters.

The second hunter looked around, surveying the crash site, and answered, "I think we're about a mile farther than last year."

Some people won't let go of something even if it can kill them.

As people of faith, there is a certain sense in which we need to learn how to let go if we want to get airborne. The memory of past mistakes and misfortunes can burden us and weigh us down. Grief, resentment, fear and anger can keep us from getting off the ground.

Letting go is not always an easy thing to do, but it is an important aspect of faith. And it is especially evident whenever we talk about stewardship.

Once a year, preachers preach about letting go of purse strings, committees send letters, and members are asked to pledge money for the work of their congregations.

We are asked to think of ourselves as "stewards." Now most of you know what this means. In biblical times, a steward was a person, probably a slave, who took care of things and dispensed things that did not belong to her or him. The things belonged to the master. And so in the Christian sense, exercising good stewardship, being stewards, means that nothing we possess belongs to us. It all belongs to God. And we must use what we have in the interests of God, who is the master.

To be good stewards requires that we let go of our notions of ownership; God is the owner. Stewardship is much more than what we may give to the institutional church. It is about what we do with our *lives*.

In one of the last scenes in the movie, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Indiana Jones is within reach of his prize, the legendary Holy Grail. There he hangs, precariously suspended over a bottomless chasm, as his father, played by Sean Connery who passed away this week, struggles to keep hold of his son's life by the grasp of his bootstrap.

"I think I can reach it," Indiana exclaims, stretching his body and his luck to the very edge. This is the moment of truth. If Indiana Jones keeps hold of the Holy Grail, his prize, he will surely slip from his father's grasp, and plummet to his death. Either he lets go, or he dies!

"Indiana," his father calls gently, "Indiana, let it go."

To save ourselves and to find life of an eternal quality, we must be able to let go of our need to acquire and possess material things. They, after all, can never truly belong to us. But you have all heard this.

Today, I want to say something different. That is, we are stewards not just of material things. We are put in control of things such as property, food, shelter, and money, all to be used in the interests of God. But this is not all. We are also stewards of grace. That is, God has given grace to each of us, and has entrusted us not to hoard it, but to dispense this grace to others. We are called to distribute the most valuable commodity to the world.

In our text from the First Letter of Peter, it says, "Like good stewards of... grace... serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received." When I first read this passage, I didn't think much of it. But there is something quite remarkable being said here: Not only are we given things such as land, money, talents, all to be used for the glory of God. But we are also given something less tangible called "grace," and we are responsible to use it as well. Essentially, God says, "Here's grace. You're in charge of it; you're stewards of it."

Now, it is my experience that stewardship is rarely talked about in this way.

Some people might say, "What do you mean, God has given me grace? I don't have any of that." Some of us don't even realize that we have it. But we all do. Everyone has experiences of grace.

The phone rings and you are surprised to hear your daughter's voice on the other end. She's just calling to say that she loves you. Grace is like that.

You've just done poorly on an exam. You're disappointed and angry with yourself. Your dad pats you on the back and says, "You'll be O.K. You'll do better next time." Grace is like that.

You've had a hard day at the office. The car needs to be fixed. The house is a mess. You have a splitting headache. And your little girl runs to meet you, gives you a messy kiss, gets this blue stuff all over your pants, and she whispers, "I love you, mommy." Grace is like that.

The weather is getting cold, but tonight you've found a place that will give you a warm meal and a clean, safe place to sleep. Grace is like that.

You've hit the snooze button on your alarm clock too many times, and now you're going to be late for church, which you find embarrassing. You show up a half hour late only to find that you are really early because it is daylight savings time. Grace is like that.

You find yourself with poor health and facing your own mortality. Loneliness, darkness, depression. And then, the feeling of someone's warm arms around your shoulders. And you find, for a moment, peace and strength to go on. Grace is like that.

We go through most of our lives not recognizing God's continual presence. We often hungrily soak up experiences of grace with barely a second thought, unaware of the giver. We hold onto them as our lifeline during the overwhelming storms of life. And yet, we are called not to hoard them but to give them away, to be dispensers of not human, but an other worldly divine love and acceptance, indeed, of the very presence of God, to others.

As stewards of grace, it is not quite accurate to say that we dispense grace or dole it out. Because God's grace, God's presence, God's love, God's wisdom, God's blessing, comes to the world and each individual at every instant.

So as stewards of grace we help others become aware of this reality. We help uncover God's endless gifts already present in the lives of others. We help connect these experiences if unconditional love to the divine Source.

Now I don't need to tell you that there are many people who are finding it increasingly difficult to see and to accept God's grace. The fastest growing religious group is those who identify themselves as "non-affiliated." I believe that the constricted image of God offered by the church has prevented countless folks from recognizing and receiving God's grace in their lives. And this is why, as stewards of grace, this congregation is so important. A precious gift has been entrusted to us. Here are some special and unique aspects of this gift:

- *We offer a Christianity that does not claim superiority over all other religious traditions. We recognize the faithfulness of other people who have names other than Jesus Christ for the gateway of God's realm. We seek to live in a mutual respect with and not proselytize those from other traditions.*
- *We extend a kind of Christianity that has an expansive and critical view of tradition. Here we value the search for meaning over absolute certainty, the questions over the answers. We have "conventional Christians" but also those "questioning skeptics." There is liberty to interpret the scriptures with multiple levels of meaning, metaphor and mystery. There is freedom to integrate historical and scientific understanding with our religious imagination.*
- *We proclaim an inclusiveness and equality in Christ: male and female, gay and straight, all races, all genders, all cultures, classes and abilities. We also insist that God's love calls us to strive for social justice and peace among all people.*
- *We share an image of God who does not act with brute force, the violent and wrathful judge, occasionally intervening with supernatural power. Rather the image we share with the world is a*

God who gently blesses and affirms, a God who is naturally present each moment in all things, a God who coaxes new life into being. We celebrate a God who does not motivate with shame, fear and threats, but a God who motivates with compassion and joy. Our open communion table signals God's unqualified love for all.

I truly believe that Community Congregational United Church of Christ's unique message helps people experience God's affirmation. Our alternative vision of Christianity works to uncover the reality of God's grace that we see in the life and ministry of Jesus.

This is what we mean when we talk about spiritual gifts in the church. To be able to offer a gift of the Spirit does not mean that we have a special talent or ability or an amount of money to give. No, a gift is a reflection of grace. The way one can tell if it is a spiritual gift, is, "Does it reveal the presence of God? Is it used for exalt oneself or does it build up others? Does it point to a love that originates beyond ourselves?"

Because you see, we all have a measure of grace to give. God's light has shined upon each of us, and each of us can hold our light high and shine it on others. There's an old poem that goes:

*Christ has no hands but our hands to do his work today,
Christ has no feet but our feet to lead people in his way;
Christ has no tongue but our tongues to tell people how he died;
Christ has no help but our help to bring them to his side.*

So as stewards, I charge you to think not so much about dispensing things and giving money. But rather, think about dispensing a vision, communicated by what we do, what we say and who we are, to help others see the presence of God's abundant grace that is already and always in their lives.