Connect – Stewardship Deepens Connections

Beloved community: I invite you to be with me in a spirit of prayer. Holy Loving Spirit, we offer such thanks for the freedom to be gathered for worship today on our live stream and in this space on Wahpekute Dakota land that has been loved across millennia. **We trust your presence with us now as we notice how we are stewarding all that we are and all that we have in the days that you give us to live.** We pray in the name of our great teacher, Jesus. Amen.

In recent days I sent a text to a fellow volunteer within a community organization. I wanted to express gratitude in the form of an affirmation. So I typed (or thumbed), "Thanks for your leadership!"

After the '*shwoop!*' that indicated my message had sent, I realized I would have more accurately written, "Thanks for your management!" Or, perhaps even, "Thanks for your stewardship!"

As we move into three weeks focused on the spiritual practice of stewardship, let's hear Merriam Webster's definition of stewardship: *"the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care."*

In my experience, we too often elevate the importance of leadership over and above the importance of management. Many of us have experienced times when our community (be that our household, our workplace, or other space of community) needed us to lead. I would suggest that ALL of us have experienced times when our community needed us to manage or steward.

In a recent Harvard Business School blog post entitled "Leadership vs. Management: What's the Difference?" Matt Gavin describes the difference between leadership and management in this way:

"Leadership focuses on setting a clear vision, inspiring teams, and driving alignment, while management centers on execution, operations, and delivering results." (https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/leadership-vs-management). Hhmmm.

Let's dive into our gospel story for today. Was the young ruler who encountered Jesus a strong leader, a strong manager, perhaps both or neither? At first glance, we may not find the young ruler and his dilemma all that relatable. We learn that the young man has immense material wealth and that he feels sadness when Jesus challenges him to give it away. We may not identify with this character's social location as one who could lean into security in the forms of both a powerful position among the people and great financial means.

Yet, if we look at an assumption the young man conveys, then we might find that we connect on common ground. He asks Jesus, *"Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"* He assumes that there are actions he can take that will ensure his inheritance of eternal life in the realm of God's love and peace that have no end.

Have you known someone who internalized a message from their family of origin or childhood church that, if they followed the rules, life would go well for them? Have you been that person? **And don't we sometimes experience disillusionment with church, family and God when that approach to life doesn't necessarily pan out?**

Jesus entertained the young man's assumption by listing off the rules of their shared faith (at least the ones that might be called the 'rules of the road' for human community) – do not be unfaithful to a committed relationship, do not do violence to one another, do not take what is not yours, do not perpetuate a lie about another, show appreciation for those who have raised you.

Yep, thought the young ruler. "*He replied, 'I have kept all these since my youth.'"*

In our Connecting With The Word midweek text study group, we recognized that Jesus did tick off the first few commandments, which articulate how we can be intentionally, actively in connection with the Love of God. *"There is still one thing lacking"* Jesus told the young man. I wonder if Jesus was thinking of the first few commandments (having no other gods but our all-inclusive God, not diminishing the name of God, and finding sabbath time of devoted rest in God's love) when he encouraged the young ruler to unburden himself before moving more deeply into discipleship of Jesus within community,

We heard that Jesus looked at the young man and said: *"How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."*

It is unfortunate that translations over time have changed this to "through the eye of a needle," because scholars tell us that there was actually a gate called The Needle's Eye. Camels who were carrying the possessions of people on pilgrimage (on their way into the holy space of Jerusalem) needed to crouch with or without packages on top of them and get through this very small space called The Needle's Eye. So Jesus' comment was based in that context.

Jesus looks at each of us and says: '*"How hard it is for those who"* _____ _____ (fill in the blank) *"to enter the kingdom of God!"* What is it that creates the barrier? As we prayed at the start of worship, we all need and long to be unburdened. Our burdens are whatever behaviors and objects create barriers in the way of our discipleship of Jesus.

Well, *“Those who heard it said, ‘Then who can be saved?’ [Jesus] replied, ‘What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.’”* God calls us to co-create moments of salvation on a daily basis. And we do that as stewards of heavenly treasure – stewards of the divine Love of god.

That divine Love that is God leads us (provides us the vision, calls us into lives of discipleship).

So we might ask ourselves: **How did I manage my resources today? How did I steward what I have of energy, physical resource, time, heart, skill? Were the moves I made in service of my deepest loyalty to love of God with my whole self and to love of my neighbor?**

The gospel story has an unresolved ending. The young ruler felt sad in light of Jesus pointing out his need to unburden himself of wealth in order to follow Jesus. We don’t know what impact the conversation with Jesus had on the young man beyond his sadness in the face of being asked to live out his faith more boldly by making a radical change.

What a gift it is to live our lives in a congregation of people seeking to be stronger disciples of Jesus.

I love how the poet phrased this:
“I do not know what you carry, but in this moment
I will help you carry it.
Or something like,
Everything depends on us treating each other well.”
May we continue to do and be that for one another as a congregation. In the song that our choir shared, we are working with one another. We are walking side by side in this effort of deepening connections and stewarding all that we have and all that we are.

I'd like to share with you just a bit of that poem as a blessing. I invite you to close your eyes if you wish or simply to hear this spoken to you:

"And if we said it enough, perhaps we'd believe it,
and if we believed it enough, perhaps we'd live it,
treating every other human like someone
who holds our very existence in their hands,
like someone whose life has been given us to serve,
even if it's only to walk together safely down the street,
hold a door, pass the salt, share a sunset,
offer a smile, and say with our actions you belong." From Rosemerry Whatola Trommer.

I often say this when I am out in our community. Our church's tagline is "Connect, Grow, Love." It is both aspirational and what we are attempting to live day by day together. May we steward all that we are and all that we have toward deeper connections. Love is counting on us. Amen.

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St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)
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Luke 18:18-30, "For When We Greet Each Other"