

Switching Seats

Barbara Fullerton at Newtonbrook U.C., Scarborough
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As I thought about the stewardship implications in today's gospel lesson, it occurred to me that stewardship involves **switching seats** – with God, and with others.

James and John had the **nerve**, first of all, to ask Jesus to give them whatever they asked. Jesus was wise enough to ask what they wanted, before he responded. That interesting question that Jesus asked – “What is it you want me to do for you?” – is repeated 15 verses later in Mark, in the story for next Sunday. Listen for the same question again, then, when Jesus asks blind Bartimaeus, “What do you want me to do for you?” The difference in responses is stunning! Bartimaeus wanted to see again. The brothers asked Jesus to promise them the best seats at the table when he comes into glory.

The other disciples were furious, as you can imagine!

But Jesus told James and John it wasn't his decision where they would sit in the here-after. Then he did his usual “good teacher thing” and asked them other questions. *After I am gone, are you ready to step into my place, essentially **switching seats** with me, and experience the same torture I am facing?* For, in God's kin-dom, the greatest one is the one who serves others, **switching seats** with them.

So, let's look at stewardship as **switching seats**.

I. First – **Switching Seats with God**

Many of us just celebrated Thanksgiving with meals around a table. How many of you sat at tables where there was a host presiding from one end of the table? At our house, there is one dining chair with arms. Stephen gets that at the head of the table. How symbolic – the head of the house, supposedly! The king of his castle. The owner!

But scripture tells us that is only an illusion. We may think we own everything we have spent “our” hard-earned money on. But have you ever seen a hearse pulling a U-Haul to a grave site? Nope, neither have I – because we can't take any of the stuff in our lives with us when we die. It was *only* in our possession on a *temporary* basis and will go to someone else when we are gone. That's because all that *is, has* been, and *will* be – belongs to God alone. All that we have, all that we are, is God's.

Our intended identity is to be stewards, not owners. Being a steward is a vocation for which we have *all* been given gifts. That is what the Garden of Eden story is about – God trusts humans to take care of our garden home. It is an *amazing* role! Douglas John Hall, Canadian

theologian, reminds us that being a steward is a biblical symbol we can *reclaim* today. He says we misuse stewardship when we think it is only about the church's finances, about *acquiring* and managing money and properties.

Getting at the *concept* of stewardship through the *role* of the steward – that's US, folks! – takes it beyond equating stewardship with discipleship. The role of steward seems to be a *mature stage* of Christian formation, surpassing that of a disciple. The dictionary¹ defines a disciple as "a follower who assists in spreading the teachings of another." The roots of "disciple"² are found in the Latin noun for "student" and the verb "to learn." The difference between disciples and stewards lies in their *agency*, what they *do*. Where a disciple follows and learns, looking for direction on how to be and what to *do*, a steward is a *fully responsible* representative – in this case – of God!

The steward is an *extraordinary* servant in a supervisory role that makes decisions and takes charge. A steward is so closely identified with the owner's interests that he/she is a full representative of the owner, *making decisions on behalf* of the owner, without consulting others. It is a *significant* position, presuming *great trust* on the part of the owner. While a steward is NOT the master or owner, and therefore is accountable to the master/owner, the steward actually gets to act *as if* they *were* the owner. Hence we preside over tables, households, and institutions.

This is more than "What would Jesus do?" While it is important to see how Jesus lived out his own role as God's steward in *his* time and context, 21st century stewards interpret *anew* what that looks like *for us today*. It requires us to be *so in tune* with what we know of God's intentions for how this world could be, that we act as *co-creators* to make it so.

We get into trouble when, like James and John, our lust for power leads us to waste our resources on the symbols of status, thinking we *own* our "own" lives and all that we have been trusted to use during our lifetime. We do so to the detriment of our relationship with God and with others, including the earth itself, as we consume and consume in ways that are harmful to our environment and to those who are hurt by our pollution and slave to produce what we want.³

Rather, we are called to *move over* – switch seats – to live out our intended steward role in God's world, as beloved children of God, "taking care of God's stuff for God's world."⁴

II. Then – *Switching Seats with Others*

As Christians, we do also follow Jesus who shows us the way to God's kin-dom⁵ of Shalom, where all will be included, and all will have enough, the way God intended. That brings us to the *other* part of *switching seats*, which relates to what Jesus told the disciples in today's story – that the one who is the greatest is the one who serves. The first shall be last and the last, first.

We in the Christian church not only "follow" Jesus as disciples, though. As stewards, we are called to more fully *embody* the servant Christ in the world. Switching seats, so to speak, living out the dream of God's kin-dom, in relationships of shalom today. We do that as stewards carrying out Christ's ministries of preaching, teaching, healing, feeding, and working for peace. We participate in those ministries and our *offerings* make them *financially* possible.

In a few weeks, at the end of your stewardship program, you will be asked to offer a prayerful estimate – a pledge – of what you plan to give in the coming year. The theme of your program this year is "Let Us Give Thanks!" That is a wonderful theme, because stewardship programs are *our reminder to each other* to "remember to say thank you!" to God. Our giving is an act of gratitude for all God has entrusted us to steward during our lifetime, including life itself. Gratitude is one way that we live out the first commandment of loving God with our whole heart, mind, soul, and strength.

But the other side of the coin is generosity – in the way we love our neighbours as ourselves. Generosity is part of being human. A friend of mine says that being generous is the same thing to being spiritually alive as breathing is to being physically alive.

For Christians in Canada to follow Jesus, to be his disciples and stewards of his mission, it is important to study the teachings of the one we claim to follow. A starting point is to look at the way Jesus answered the person who asked how he could enter God's kin-dom. That was the gospel lesson last week! Since he already kept all the commandments, Jesus said all that was left for the man to be perfect was to sell all he had, give the money to the poor and follow Jesus.

Other versions of the story involve discussion of the greatest commandment – any good Jew knew that the first commandment was to love God with all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love one's neighbour as one's self was second. Then Jesus told the Good Samaritan story to expand the understanding of neighbour. The Samaritan literally *switched seats* with the fallen stranger, putting the injured man on his own donkey. Other Bible passages give

further insights, such as Jesus' teaching in Matthew 25 (31-46) equating kindness to "the least of these" as kindness extended to Jesus himself. Another seat-switch of sorts.

Is Bible Study part of our stewardship? Absolutely!!⁶ Understanding our vocations as stewards *requires* knowing the heart, mind and vision of God in order to act on God's behalf for and *in* God's world.

Those who study the Bible know that Jesus talked more about the kin-dom, God's dream for the world, than anything else. His second most frequent topic—in about half the parables—was money and possessions, and how they reflect *and affect* our relationship with God, each other, and all of creation. The most obvious way to get at the former topic, how the world might be a better place, is to consider the second topic: money and stuff and how we use them. Decisions about allocation of money and resources can explicitly relate to bringing about God's dream for the world God created and loves. SO, your church asks that you be intentional about your decisions about how much you give to carry out the ministries of Jesus to make the world a better place. This leads to the...

III. Nuts-and-bolts of your giving program

There are at least two main reasons you are being asked to give an estimate of your next year's giving. 1) the estimates help the church and 2) they help us as individuals, too!

How do they help the church? I need to know how much income I will receive before I spend it. You do, too! Your church family also needs to know what its income will be in order to plan the ministries you have agreed to do together in the year ahead.

Meanwhile, my estimate of giving also helps me – in two ways. It helps me 1) to be *intentional* about my giving and 2) to make my giving a *priority*.

Planning helps me to be intentional. And making a commitment makes my intention, as well as how much I give, a faith-based *priority* in my personal or family budget.

I know in advance what my mortgage or car or insurance payments will be. Doing God's work is as high a priority as any of those budget items. For some of us – maybe MORE important! So, I plan my giving intentionally – *right at the top* of my monthly budget priorities. The Bible calls that "first-fruits" giving. If the amount I give in the offering were only what I would spend going to the movies or getting a daily coffee or even eating out once a week, then I wouldn't need to put as much thought into it. But it is so much more important than that.

Think about the places *you* spend the most money. What do you spend on golf fees, vacations or on eating out; dance lessons, music lessons, or sports expenses for the kids? Or on your own tickets to sports events, concerts, and entertainment? How does your money (\$) relationship with *God* compare?

As you think about the response you will give about how much you plan to give next year, think about whether it is “just” a money decision, or a spiritual decision? A life decision? Does it reflect God’s place in your life? You still have several weeks to pray about that decision and – if you have a partner and other family members – to discuss it together.

I can’t tell you how to make your decision, but sometimes it is helpful to hear how others make such decisions. We all get so many requests for money, don’t we? Many of them touch my heart. But in the many opportunities to give, several factors stand out for my partner and me: overhead costs and the donor pool are two of them.

1) **Overhead costs:** I want the largest part of my money to be put to the use I want to support, rather than for advertizing and administration. I know that happens in my church – both locally and nationally for the Mission & Service Fund.

2) **Pool of donors:** Other organizations have the whole neighbourhood to canvas. We church members are the only ones giving to the work and ministries we do together in this place or across Canada and around the world through the Mission and Service Fund. (M&S offers us a way to be partners with others in the wider United Church as one of the world’s constructive forces for good. A BIG thank you to Newtonbrook for your generous gifts to M&S!)

Like many of you, Stephen and I choose to give our tithe – 10% of our income – our *primary* giving, through the United Church. I give through PAR to the church where my membership is, so it is there when I’m not. And I give half to M&S. If you aren’t yet tithing, figure out what percentage of income you are currently giving and consider growing by one percent next year.

Then we make choices about other gifts outside the church – over and above our regular offerings. My family has been touched by AIDS, Alzheimer’s, cancer, Downes’ Syndrome, heart disease, osteoporosis, and Parkinson’s – all of which we give to fund research for. We also give to the arts, because we think that’s important, too. But our primary giving is through our church.

Our stewardship doesn't start with money, though. It starts with God. It doesn't start with what we give – whether time, talent, or treasure. It starts with God's gift.

And God's gift is everything. Everything we *have*. Everything we *are*.
So, stewardship is everything we *do* after we realize that! This would mean that:

every **decision** we make
every **action** we take and
the resources we use to support those decisions and actions
are part of our stewardship.

I am nowhere close to basing all my decisions and use of resources, including time and self-care (especially!), in a way that reflects God's ongoing presence and limitless love in my life! How about you? I wonder how that might change if, with every choice we make – especially those about money! – we would ask, “How does this honour God? Does this show that I know God loves me and that God is first in my life?” What if we prayed about every decision – including our money decisions? John Wesley, founder of Methodism, one of the roots of the United Church, wrote a stunning prayer to pray before spending money – virtually making spending a spiritual experience!⁷

When Jesus responded to James' and John's ridiculous question about saving them seats, he wanted to wake them up to the possibility that there was so much more available to us – more love, more joy, more justice – through right relationship with God in community with our neighbours. That happens when we *switch seats*, moving over to acknowledge God is the centre of our hearts and lives, and then *switching seats* again to make room for others at the table.

And this *seat switching* to “be in right relationship with God and with our neighbour” is not something that we do sporadically or just when we feel like it. It is a way of being, a lifestyle.

Janie had reached school age, and her father worked very hard to enthuse her about the idea of school – helped her choose what she would wear, told her about the other children she would meet, got her so excited about the project that she eagerly went off on the first day, and came home afterward with excellent reports of what school was like. Well, the next morning, Dad went into Janie's bedroom and said she had to get up. Janie said, "What for?" He replied, "You've got to go to school." She said, "What, *again*?"

Stewardship is a lot like that. We are stewards ALL the time, whether good ones or not! It's like getting up for school or work – or whatever we do – day after day. When asked to make our estimate about how much we will give to God's mission through our offering, hopefully we won't groan, “What, again?”

May God bless the choices you make as you continue to explore what it means to *switch seats* – with God and with others! You have much to celebrate in the grace God gives you to live generously in the Newtonbrook U.C. faith community. Thanks be to God! Amen

¹ ITP Nelson Dictionary

² *Discipulus* = pupil; *discere* = to learn

³ Thanks to Paul Mullen for the thought, from a FB post to me and other friends.

⁴ A phrase Elisabeth Jones (at UTC in Montreal) likes to use.

⁵ Using the word kin-dom, rather than kingdom, is intentional. It is relational, rather than hierarchical.

⁶ In my doctor of ministry research, United Church congregations with higher per capita giving were more likely than other congregations to offer opportunities for spiritual nurture, such as Bible study and small group ministries. *Growing Generosity: Identity as Stewards in The United Church of Canada* by Barbara Fullerton (Washington, D.C.: Wesley Theological Seminary, 2009).

⁷ Wesley's prayer before spending money:

“Try whether you can say to the Searcher of hearts, your conscience not condemning you,

‘Lord, thou seest I am going to expend this sum on that food, apparel, furniture. And thou knowest, I act herein with a single eye as a steward of thy goods, expending this portion of them thus in pursuance of the design thou hadst in entrusting me with them. Thou knowest I do this in obedience to the Lord, as thou commandest, and because thou commandest it. Let this, I beseech thee, be an holy sacrifice, acceptable through Jesus Christ!

And give me a witness in myself that for this labour of love I shall have a recompense when thou rewardest every man according to his works.’

Now if your conscience bear you witness in the Holy Ghost that this prayer is well-pleasing to God, then have you no reason to doubt but that expense is right and good, and such as will never make you ashamed.”

(John Wesley – Sermon 50 – The Use of Money)