

Stigweards (Ref. 'Firstfruits by Bob Heerspink)

Please take the most valuable possession that you dare and hand it to the person sitting beside you. It may be something of monetary value, or something that personally means a lot. If you had a conversation here are the kinds of things you might say to each other.

Please take care of this for me.

What would you like me to use it for?

How long would you like me to hold it?

I will ask for an accounting of how you have used it.

Now, let's listen to Genesis 1:26-31.

The creation story unfolds, day by day. If we've heard it before we know the rhythm.

'And God said, 'and there was', and God saw that it was good.'

Light, sky, seas, vegetation, stars, birds, fish, animals.

Now, we come face to face with the crown of God's creation.

"Let us make man in our image, in our likeness'. Twice more we hear this word, 'image'.

That's a mysterious and intriguing term. What exactly does it mean?

It is tempting to look for the image of God in a certain quality. Down through history, whatever human quality we prize most highly we have called 'the image of God'. Reason, Love, Community, Faithfulness, Justice etc,

But the text does not give us that. It says that our 'imaging' God has to do with our **relationship** to the rest of creation.

The clue is right there in the words that follow:

"Let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air...."

This is repeated just a few verses later in the words of blessing. 'Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it'. 'The words for 'rule over' and 'subdue' do not need to sound quite so dominant. They can have the sense of 'tread' or 'walk', as in 'get out there and walk around all over the earth.

So we are created. Just like light, sky, seas, geraniums, stars, chickens, dolphins and rabbits.

But we are different. We are not divine. We are not 'gods' or 'goddesses' in the making.

We are 'in-between' creatures. In between God and the rest of his created world.

We are made in God's image. We represent the Lord of the fish, to the fish. The Lord of the trees, to the trees. We are ambassadors for and of the King of glory.

More than that. The God who created and owns all things gives you and me responsibility to manage parts of his creation. To 'rule over' creation.

We are 'stigwards'. It is Old English. 'Stig' for 'house', and 'weard' for 'warden' or 'keeper'. Our word 'steward' comes from 'stigward'. The steward is the one who is given the responsibility to manage the owner's estate. The steward is not the owner. (must remember that at all times) Here is just a bit of what the Bible teaches us about being stewards.

1. What we hold, really belongs to the Lord. Like the Bible story of Joseph, the steward speaks with the authority of Joseph. Like the Bible story of David, the stewards have oversight of David's kingdom.

Mutual fund managers are stewards of other people's money.

Politicians are stewards of the resources of the citizens, of their town or province or country.

To give someone power of attorney is to say, 'in the event that I cannot take care of my own affairs, I give you the power to be the steward over my estate, and even my life'.

A baby sitter is a steward of children that belong to the parents.

Parents must remember that our children really belong to the Lord.

We are stewards of all that God has entrusted to us.

2. What we hold, we **must** use for the purposes of the Lord, the true owner.

This will take some discernment and thinking and sorting out on our parts.

We will have to ask hard questions. What does it mean that my driver's license really belongs to the Lord? What does it mean that my health is a trust given to me by the Lord? Thankfully, and wisely the Bible gives us two

broad instructions: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself'. Take those two commands into your questions about the specific use of what has been trusted to you.

3. Our stewardship is time limited. Jesus tells stories about stewards who think the owner will never show up. They get slack and sloppy, then even hostile to the owner's son.

As Tony Campolo famously said, 'we all need to realize that the day will come when they will carry us out of the church to a hole in the ground, throw dirt in our face and then go back to the church to eat potato salad'. Our stewardship is time limited. And, no one has figured out yet, how to take any of 'our stuff' with us.

I met Bob Heerspink at Synod (the annual general meeting of the Christian Reformed Church) He presented to our committee, he was excited about using any available tools of media to get the gospel of Jesus Christ out to the world. That was in June. In July he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Yesterday I got an email that said that Bob Heerspink had died. This book on Stewardship is now one of his legacies. He would have preferred more time for his family, for his work, for life here. But, our stewardship is time limited, and we don't know when that time will be.

4. All stewards, all managers will one day have to give an account of their stewardship. It comes with the job. (Auditors hold us to account)

It is a constant theme: In Jesus' story of the talents, the question comes: 'what did you do with what I gave you?'

Leaders in the church are told, 'Be caretakers of the house of God, as those who must give account'. The story of the crooked manager, another one Jesus tells, builds to the point where the manager has to give an account.

Unless you are willing to say that this life is all there is, that God does not exist, that when they turn off the blinking machine in the hospital it is completely game over, you've got to think about the account you will give to the Lord for how you have used what has been entrusted to you. How we have used what has been entrusted to us.

I challenge you today to listen to God's call to think of yourself, as you really are, a steward of his gifts to you. As we have learned with our little exercise of giving and receiving something important and valuable from each other, being a steward and being an owner who has a steward takes trust **on both sides!** Oddly, it takes trust from the Lord to give us responsibility.

I feel like I am shouting into the wind of our culture. Our culture says, 'it's yours', 'your children are yours', 'your church membership is yours', 'what you hold together as a congregation, the gospel of Jesus Christ is yours', as long as **you** know him, that's good enough,' the gifts we have as people, the skills, talents, are yours,' 'the physical property, this building, this lawn and pavement is yours; 'the money in your bank account is yours to do with as you please'.

You are owners!

God says, 'you are stewards'. 'All you have is a trust from me to you. I am counting on you to use it for me. Represent me well to the fish and trees and animals and neighbours. Represent me well, this is your life's work. Represent me by using 'your stuff' to love me, to love your neighbor.

Here is one way where the point of the message comes home to us. We may well live in one of the best places in the world. We had a transition of political power last night (new premier). It was handled in a completely peaceful and orderly way. Economic opportunities are unlimited for us. We just so have the commodities that the world cannot do without. (Oil, and water too) Even compared to most other parts of Canada, we have it really good.

As a congregation we have it pretty good. Many of us take great vacations, we have very nice homes, and we have 'homes' that we can drive or tow down the road, or actual second homes where we can vacation.

And yet, if you read the bulletin today, our church budget is at 70% of what we've committed to together as a congregation. Whenever we run short, the shortfall is taken by missions.

There is a challenge here for us all. It is so easy to think, 'I will give more when I have bought, done etc, etc It is so easy to think 'I need to look after myself'. I will give more when I have paid off my mortgage, or whatever. But there will never be an easier time to give generously from what has been entrusted to us. I challenge all of you younger people too. There will never be an easier time in your life to start to give of what God has entrusted to you.

God says, 'May I remind you that your time is limited'. 'I will ask for an accounting of your stewardship', so be ready at any time.

God longs to say the same thing we long to hear:

'Well done, good and faithful steward!'

The Lord be gracious to you.

The Lord be gracious to me.

And all God's people said, Amen.