

Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee

May 25, 2008

Stewards of Grace

1 Corinthians 4:1

On my recent trip to Europe I was able to visit St. Nicholas Church in Strasbourg where John Calvin served a congregation of French refugees. In that congregation, Calvin made a discovery that transformed his life and ministry. These refugees were singing the psalms in their native language. This was a radical innovation for those who had grown up in the old church where the singing was done by a priest or by choirs and never by the people. Calvin quickly recognized that congregational singing helped people to discover that they were part of what God was doing in the world. With his encouragement the practice spread to many of the Reformed churches.

In his book on the Reformation Diarmaid MacCullough describes the impact of this new practice in these words:

In the old Latin liturgy the psalms were largely used in monastic services and in private devotional recitation. Now they were redeployed in Reformed Protestantism...to articulate the hope, fear, joy, and fury of the new movement. They became the secret weapon of the Reformation not merely in France but wherever the Reformed brought new life to the Protestant cause...The psalms were easily memorized embracing the illiterate along with the literate...They were customarily sung in unison to a large range of dedicated tunes (newly composed to emphasize the break with the religious past)...The psalms could be sung in worship or in the marketplace...and instantly united a Protestant crowd in ecstatic companionship just as [a soccer] chant does today on the stadium terraces [of Europe] (*The Reformation: A History*, pages 307-308).

John Calvin understood that the singing of psalms was an effective way of helping people to internalize their faith and share it with others. Calvin hired the best musicians he could find to put the psalms to music. We still sing hymns based on the Genevan Psalter that Calvin's musicians created. But Calvin and his fellow reformers were not the only one who recognized the spiritual power of this practice. When Protestants were condemned to be burned at the stake in France in the 1540s the authorities often had their tongues cut out first. They did not want the condemned going into the fire singing psalms and igniting more Protestant rallies. The authorities were worried that too many people had already been transformed by these songs of faith. The condemned were denied the opportunity to share their faith one last time.

In the 4th chapter of 1 Corinthians Paul is trying to put his people in touch with the same kind of spiritual transformation. Paul is defending his ministry from those who have already passed negative judgments on him. Paul points out that his ministry is not about his gifts or his competence. It is about what God is doing in the world. Our job is to be stewards of God's grace. The steward is one who is a trustee of something that belongs to someone else. We are stewards who have been entrusted with the gift of God's grace. We are called to be faithful in sharing that grace with others. The grace that God has given to us is not to be hoarded but to be shared.

I came to understand this process a little better after some correspondence I had on the internet recently. I had responded to an unsolicited email from a woman who had seen some of my family history research online. She was researching her family which had been connected with my family in Ireland and North Carolina in the 18th century. Her timing was exceptionally good because I had just made some major discoveries which spilled over into her family. I was more than happy to send that information to her and she was thrilled with what I had provided.

Then she started sending me daily messages with information about my family that I already had. Each time she would ask, “Did you know this?” and I would respond saying, “Thank you, but I already have that.” When she continued to do this I realized that she was trying to pay me back for what I had given to her. She was scouring the internet looking for something to trade. Finally I had to say to her, “There is no need for you to reciprocate. You don’t have to pay me back. I am happy to share with you what I have found because others have been generous in sharing with me.”

As I wrote that to her it suddenly occurred to me that her world assumes that everything is a transaction. I was pointing her to a strange new world that is all about grace. Our job as stewards is to keep the grace flowing. Sometimes we do that without even thinking about what we are doing. Being a steward of grace is a habit forming activity. Paul understood that the steward is one who is transformed by participating in what God is doing in the world.

Jesus speaks of this process in the 6th chapter of Matthew. There Jesus warns of the anxiety which comes from having divided allegiances. When we live to serve ourselves rather than God we tend to become overwhelmed with worry. But when we see ourselves as channels for God’s grace the burden of anxiety falls from our shoulders as we are transformed. Like the birds of the air and the lilies of the field we are set free to unselfconsciously participate in what God is doing in the world. We become stewards without even realizing it.

Tom McGrath has described what happens when people discover their identity as stewards of grace:

Before my father died, he was recuperating from surgery at a large care facility. The size of the complex and the great number of people in difficult straits being treated there might have made the facility dreary. But the administration and staff had taken great care to respond to the patients’ spiritual and human needs just as they took care of their physical needs. They placed a large aviary in the middle of a spacious day room. Patients in all states and conditions gathered there and watched dozens of brightly colored birds flit and chirp and peck at bird seed in the glassed-in sunlit enclosure.

I noticed how every face was softened with delight as patients watched the birds. No matter their age, the people became like little children—forgetting their troubles and engaging one another in conversation. The care facility’s managers were not just good health care providers; they also chose to be trusted stewards of the mysteries of God tending to mind, heart, body and soul (*Christian Century*, May 20, 2008, page 20).

That is the decision to which God call us today. The grace which lives at the center of your life is ready to be shared.