

## **Given: Exploring the Practice of Christian Stewardship**

November 17

Living Waters Church, Fort Langley

### **Introduction:**

Here we are just a few short weeks away from the season we call *Advent*, wherein we reflect on the waiting for God's arrival among us. And in a little over a month at Christmas we'll celebrate that life given fully to God for the sake of the world. So maybe it's fitting that we're spending two weeks now, just ahead of that season, on what it means to live a "given" life ourselves, exploring the Christian practice of stewardship. First, I'd like to ask, what do we mean when we say the words "Christian stewardship", to some a familiar term and to others entirely alien. I think those words have at least a little to do with the idea that we have *been given to* by God, and *we are given by God*. So today we'll discuss *being given* (broad theology of stewardship), and *living as given persons*. Probably a good place to start is with Jesus himself and the words we find in John's gospel where we hear him say: "*No one takes my life from me, but I give it freely...*" (John 10.18)

### **Being Given**

- STORY: "*But that's what nanas' are for...*"

That question of "what are nanas' for?" or more generally "what are any of us here for?" is central to the human experience, and no doubt occupies us constantly. We ask it as children, we ask it in mid-life, we ask it on our deathbeds if we get the chance. *What am I here for?* That question is also central to Bible, which is full of stories of people, groups, even entire nations wrestling with the question throughout millennia.

Early on in scripture we get the sense that as *central* as this question is for humanity, humanity itself isn't at the *center* of things; that is to say, we learn that the earth doesn't revolve around us. In Genesis 1 and 2 we meet a *God* at the center of things, who creates and sustains all life, including humanity, and gives humanity not only a place to live, but a home for which to caretake. And here we find the beginnings of Judeo-Christian stewardship, the beginnings of an answer to the question "what am I here for?" All life is given by God, and humans are designed as *caretaking agents* of everything placed around us. Psalm 24 tells us: "*The earth is the Lord's,*

*and everything in it. The world and all it's people belong to him. For he laid the earth's foundations on the seas and built it on the ocean depths."* And we see this reality playing out in lives like Abraham's in Genesis 12, who we are told is uniquely "blessed by God". But he isn't blessed for his own sake only, but is "blessed to be a blessing". In other words, Abraham is given to, in order to give to others. Abraham is a caretaking agent of God's blessing, a steward, of what God gives. We meet character after character who wrestles with being given, more often than not doing a fair amount of taking along the way (just as we each do). But then we come to the pinnacle of scripture and are introduced to Jesus, the truly human one. A person given to the world, and a person participating in this generosity by giving his life for the world. In the stories about Jesus we see in a sense the very heart of God walking around outside of God's chest, on public display. Here in Jesus is God's heart, flesh and blood, pulsating in the middle of things. And what we see is a giving heart, an unswervingly generous heart. And we are told to trust that the heart we see in Jesus, is God's heart. Followers of Jesus, we read later, are those who open themselves to God's generous heart, and become generosity conduits themselves. Persons who learn they are loved and learn to love in response. So the whole of scripture indicates that all of life is a gift, and that really living is about growing up into a *given life*. *What are we here for?*, we ask. Scripture answers, *we're here to receive God's generous life, and to share it among ourselves so long as we have the chance.*

- QUOTE: Eugene Peterson, *Run with the Horses*:

*"Giving is the style of the universe. Giving is woven into the fabric of existence. If we try to live by getting instead of giving, we are going against the grain. It is like trying to go against the law of gravity - the consequence is bruises and broken bones. In fact, we do see a lot of distorted, misshapen, crippled lives among those who defy the reality that all life is given and continues to be given to be true to its nature..."*

*Giving is what we do best...the action that was designed into us before our birth. Giving is the way the world is. God gives himself. He also gives away everything that is. He makes no exceptions for any of us. We are given away to our families, to our neighbours, to our friends, to our enemies - to the nations. Our life is for others. That is the way creation works.*

*Some of us try desperately to hold on to ourselves, to live for ourselves. We look so bedraggled and pathetic doing it, hanging onto the dead branch of a bank account for dear life, afraid to risk ourselves on the untried wings of giving. We don't think we can live generously because we've never tried.*

*But the sooner we start the better, for we are going to have to give up our lives finally, and the longer we wait the less time we have for the soaring and swooping life of grace."*

So the whole of the Christian life is about learning to give our whole selves back to God through the giving of ourselves to others – most obviously through our time, our energy and our resources. That's the invitation of Jesus - to live in the awareness that we are *given persons*, that our lives are about caretaking, stewarding, and to grow up, inch by inch, into people who are characterised by God's generosity.

### **Hitting Pause**

That's where we might press pause for a moment and return to that central human question of "*what am I here for?*" The first step in exploring stewardship is probably to do some reflection and prayer, and to ask ourselves how this reality of being *given persons* is or isn't coming through in our often hurried, distracted lives. Are we only consumers, or are we contributors? Are we satisfied by only taking, or are we hungry for a life of openhanded giving such as Jesus' exemplified, and for which we were made? And this of course is a practice, these are questions, we return to over again in a life of faith. They don't weigh us down, but open us up to the reality of God's nature, and the reality of human design and purpose. So in the safety and abundance of grace we can ask "*what am I here for?*" and joyfully explore the paths God leads us down. It's then that the pressure of that question is lifted; we stop stressing to answer it ourselves in isolation and allow God to do the leading and answering.

- QUOTE: Henri Nouwen, *Intimacy*.

*"The core message of Christianity is exactly this message of the possibility of transcending the taking form of our human existence. The main witness of this message is Jesus who in the exposure of his total vulnerability broke through the chains of death and found his life by losing it. He challenges us to face our fellow man without fear and to enter with Him in the fellowship*

*of the weak, knowing that it will not bring destruction but creation, new energy, new life, and – in the end – a new world.”*

*We have been given to, we are given ourselves, we’re invited to live as given persons.*

## **Living Given**

- QUOTE: Winston Churchill:

*“We make a living by what we get (earn). We make a life by what we give.”*

When I first heard those words I was inspired, but soon after I had a question. *If I am to make a life by what I give, where and how do I do that?* When we start down the road of taking Jesus seriously, living as a given person, right away we’re faced with the *hows and the wheres*. We’re faced with questions about substance, matter, people, places, events, choices – real life. Living as given persons isn’t done of course in the abstract or in isolation as an idealized thought exorcize. This “soaring, swooping life of grace”, only happens where we find ourselves in the here and now. For a Christian the here and now is first within the community of faith - the often unsexy, run of the mill, life together - which has always translated into the sharing of our time, our energy and our resources one with the other. Jesus prayed that we would remain *together* and sharing is at the center of unity. But surely, we might think, there’s somewhere else more exciting to practice being a *given person*? Surely *living given* doesn’t start with my family and friends and boring old church? Well, according to Jesus, it does. Just after Jesus washes his disciples’ feet in John 13 we hear him say, *“Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.”* Apparently, there’s little wiggle room. In the family of faith, your needs are my needs, and my needs are your needs – as inconvenient and unattractive as that might be - it starts with us. It starts right here. It starts with smelly foot washing. But once we’ve come to grips with that fact that God doesn’t happen somehow “over there” but “right here” in front of us - not in the idealized abstract but in the imperfect relationships and places we belong to - we begin to see what’s possible. We begin to see that what’s right in front of us is full of potential, a joy, beyond the abstract or idealized.

In light of this I'd like spend our remaining time considering three ways in which our participation in a given life plays out in: local church health, community health and personal health.

### Local Church Health

- QUOTE: Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*.

*"Community is made of the gentle concern that people show each other every day. It is made of small gestures, of services and sacrifices which say 'I love you' and 'I'm happy to be with you'. It is letting the other go in front of you, not trying to prove you are right in a discussion; it is taking small burdens from the other."*

When we practice stewardship, live given (sharing our time, our energy and our resources with one another) we're not merely doing so in order to accomplish things together. We're making community possible. Community develops when we contribute, not only consume. Elsewhere Vanier speaks of what he calls the poles of community. One pole is of *belonging*; community is only possible if we help to make one another belong. The other pole is *purpose*; community can only happen if a group is contributing to some common goal. This takes contribution, not just from "the professionals" or the eager, not just the 10% doing 90% of the work, but by the whole group. So, when we know we *belong* in the group and when we have a *purpose together* in a group toward which we're all contributing, Vanier argues it's then we discover true community. That's why, for example, at Living Waters we've often said that church is less like a supermarket designed for pure consumption, and more like a community garden where we each contribute for the sake of health and growth of the whole community. But we can't be a true community garden, a thriving expression of the church, if we don't each of us accept the invitation to become gardeners, to contribute, to give, to serve, for the sake of the whole.

So, this church needs each of us. This family needs our time, our energy, our resources, not only to "do things" but to truly be a genuine community of faith in the first place. Community happens when we're willing to offer our gifts, our abilities, even our finances for the health of the community. As St. Paul says, "the eye can't say to the hand, 'I don't need you...'" But

neither can we say to ourselves, “I’m not needed!”. The hand can’t say to itself, “The eye doesn’t need me. Seems to be doing fine by itself.” In order to really be a family, a body, a true community, everyone’s participation is vital. Every gift is discovered, treasured, given and received. And we know how easy it is to fail at this kind of living. But perfection isn’t the goal, growth is the hope. When we come with that attitude of working in the community garden together, not just consuming in the supermarket, we make health possible in our faith community. And we expect then that health in the local church translates to neighbourhood/community health.

### **Neighbourhood/Community Health**

That’s the second way in which living as given persons plays out. When we come offering our time, energy and resources, all of that spills out over into the life of the surrounding community. This church is full of stories of what has been made possible in some corner of the lower mainland because of the consistent, generous work of this local church, planted and present for decades. Be it through things like Helping Hands, breakfast programs, the Salvation Army Gateway of Hope, our Social Justice Network, serving children, teenagers, university students. Even in the simple invitations every week into our homes and offices to be people who make space, listen or offer help. Contributing through our faith community, translates into neighbourhood renewal in large and small ways. What we can do together as church, we couldn’t do as individuals. Sometimes we might be tempted to think, “I don’t need to be involved or give at church because I can do that anywhere, I can hedge my bets”, and we rightly should be involved in the life of the community around us – we talk about that often. But that needn’t be at the expense of giving and serving *through* our local church. Living Waters is celebrating our 80<sup>th</sup> birthday as a church in 2020. For 80 years others before us have believed that contributing through this local church can bring about community health. And because of their faithfulness, often small numbers of them over many years, we’re seeing some of those results today. I think about a number of weeks ago when we held training for drug overdose response for the benefit of our neighbourhoods. We only have a room to do that in because people gave, served and sacrificed – to make this space possible.

It's up to us today, to look around our neighbourhoods and imagine how the church of Jesus can further embed, further serve, further help to heal. In December we'll be sharing our annual Social Justice giving. The numbers aren't in yet but it will be somewhere around \$50,000, and we're so thankful for the benevolence of everyone who gives throughout the year to make that possible. I believe we can do more to serve and bless our neighbourhoods in the name of Jesus if we all get involved. So the invitation is to participate in the life of Living Waters, with our gifts, with our finances, so we can be who the church is meant to be in our neighbourhoods. That's why we're here as a church. We want to be generous because Jesus is generous. That's only possible when we each participate.

### **Personal Growth**

The third way *living given* is played out in our personal growth. This is ground we already covered. When we serve, when we give, we become more of who we truly are as human beings. We let go of our consumeristic obsessions and in learning to give we grow. As Churchill says, we begin not *just making a living, but making a life*.

- QUOTE: Jean Vanier, *Life Together*.

*"There is nothing stronger than a heart which loves and is freely given to God and to others."*

We want to be a church made up of strong-hearted people. That's why we'll always invite one another to give of our time, our energy and resources at Living Waters. Talking about contributing rather than just consuming, inviting one another to *discover a given* life, is about not just about community goals, but personal growth. It's about becoming "strong-hearted" together.

### **Conclusion**

So why don't we hit pause here, and pick up again next week as we explore the importance and health of *living given*, of Christian stewardship. But let's just consider this in conclusion. If Living Waters has become your church home, we're inviting one another to do some reflecting and praying. How are we *Living Giving*?

- What can we celebrate that in one another? What can we grow further into?

Everyone is needed. We're all necessary. God has given us to one another and to the wider world. What is possible is in our hands.

- STORY: *That's what nanas' are for.*

It's never too early, never too late, to step into the life God has offered us. Jesus said, "*No one takes my life from me, I give it freely...*"

#### **Discussion Questions:**

- What about this topic interests, inspires or daunts you?
- What did you learn from this week's sermon?
- In what ways do you see the people around you *living as given* persons? What can we celebrate?
- What ways are you considering what it might further mean to *live as a given person*, as that relates to our local church, our neighbourhood health or personal health?