

Today marks the second Sunday in stewardship season. I've always found it kind of funny that we talk about having a stewardship *season*. Because stewardship is the act of taking care, and there are so few things in our lives, and in the life of a church, that can survive by being taken care of only once a year. Last week my sermon was titled, "The Stewardship of Mission," and in your bulletin this morning you'll find a full two pages of information regarding our mission efforts here at Four Corners. Information about all the ways we are working to create a better world not just for some, but for all, and especially for the poor and marginalized. We do it not by sticking to ourselves but by forming partnerships with the Northern Rhode Island Food Pantry, a Mobile Loaves and Fishes Ministry, a Tag Tree program and so much more. By pledging to give money to our Missions budget, as a church we in turn lend our financial support to the work of these various groups. But more than this, when it comes time to open the food pantry, or to take the Mobile Loaves and Fishes food truck into Woonsocket to feed the hungry, or to work the soup kitchen line, we can say we'll go.

So, some can give the money that buys the food, some can donate the food itself, and some can open their hand to serve the food. It's all a part of what we call Missions. As for what we call the people who are a part of Missions, we usually call them volunteers. They are the dozen or so people who either donated the food, or who gave the money to buy the food, that we used to stock the Mobile Loaves and Fishes truck yesterday. And they're the people who donated the meatballs, or gave the money we used to buy the meatballs, to feed 45 hungry mouths at the soup kitchen in Pawtucket, also yesterday. And they're the 20 or so people who went to Woonsocket to stand in line with our hungry neighbors as they got a hot meal off the truck, along with the 9 people who worked the kitchen in Pawtucket, and the 14 people who lugged computers and TVs and electronics of all shapes and sizes out of cars and into bins yesterday as part of our Electronic Recycling event. They are you, the volunteers who make the various mission efforts of our church go. But I think the word I would use to describe you all is steward. You are stewards, not just volunteers. Volunteers stand out for their willingness to leave behind their own comforts and surroundings and to

go spend some time in a place that is not their own, with a people who are not their own, doing something that is necessary. Volunteers have been known to join the army, to march off to war. Volunteers have been known to travel half-way across the world to help communities rebuild following natural disasters. Volunteers dedicate hours to hospitals and soup kitchens and great missions. But volunteers also get to go home. At the end of the day, volunteers stand out for the willingness to go spend time in a place that is not their own, but always they return to a place that is their own.

Stewards, on the other hand, think of wherever they are as being the place that is their own. And whatever people they are with as the ones to whom they belong. Stewards do not think of themselves as being any more capable, or richer, or holier, or better-off than anyone else. In fact, when serving, stewards do not look to do anything *for* another person. They look to do it *with* them. They understand that the point of service is not to show-off who we are. But rather to help another person discover more fully who they are. Not to make ourselves feel better, but to make another person feel more human, more dignified. We speak of the need for stewardship when it comes to mission because we know that if we don't take care, if we don't pay careful attention to what we are doing, mission work can lead to false notions of heroism, pride, and self-importance. Take for instance the request of James and John in the passage Annie read for us just a moment ago. Sometimes referred to as the "Sons of Thunder," James and John have come to Jesus to ask him to do for them whatever they ask. "And what is it that you want me to do for you?" Jesus asks them. "Give that one of us may sit on your right hand and one on your left hand in glory."

It's a request we're told that angers the other disciples. And I don't wonder why. All twelve of them have been with Jesus now for nearly 3 years. All twelve of them left home and family. They've all made sacrifices to be where they are today. They were all chosen by him to be his disciples. "You did not choose me. I have chosen you," he told them. So who are James and John to get special seating next to Jesus? Why not Judas and Thomas? Or Thaddeus and Andrew?

This past week I got the idea to ask a few of our children to take a stab at answering some questions about church and what they get out of coming to this place week after week. Among the questions: If Jesus were to come to our church, where do you think he would sit? Who would he sit next to? Back on Monday, before sending the questions out to

the whole group, I decided to try the questions out on my own two children. Rowan said that he thought Jesus would sit behind Miss Nancy and Mr. Ray. I asked him if that's because that's where he sits. Rowan said, "No, it's so he could keep an eye on Mr. Ray." Now I get to work with Ray every day of the week, and I can tell you without question, it's an absolute privilege to get to watch Ray at work. I don't think that's the sentiment Rowan had in mind, though! Lillian said that she didn't think Jesus would be able to sit down. That wanting to sit next to everyone, he would have a difficult time picking a seat.

We're talking about the stewardship of community. Community has become a fragile thing these days. Like mission, it's something we have to take special care of. Because in our politics, in our schools, in our workplaces, in our churches, community is losing its hold upon us. It may have to do with the way we talk about one another. It may have to do with the way we fear being around one another. It may have to do with the fact that we no longer have much time to sit still long enough to get to know one another. Whatever the case, community has become a fragile thing.

What must have upset the disciples so much about the request of James and John is the way it threatened their sense of community.

Yesterday, while standing around waiting for the group to head off to Woonsocket, I looked around at everyone who had gathered to help feed the hungry. There were some middle school students who brought along a parent. Ella Henderson, one of our high school students, had her mom drop her off. She rode in the truck with Mark Fortin and Steve Hill. Wade came with his granddaughter. Lea Dau and Becky Plasse and Elaine Beach were all there. Nicole and Rhonda came early to help prep things and Diane Richmond stayed behind to help clean-up. Looking around at everyone I leaned over to Anne Bouchard and remarked, "I just love these people." As we stood there holding hands and praying I said to the group, "How wonderful that we belong to one another! Now go and share your belonging."

Did you notice that Jesus doesn't get angry with James and John over their request for greatness, that he doesn't respond the way we think he might? As Martin Luther King Jr. once pointed out, Jesus doesn't tell them they are stepping out of their place by making such a request. Instead, Jesus says, "Oh, I see. You want to be great? You want to be important? You want to be recognized? Well, you ought to be. But recognize this, those

who would be the greatest among you must be the servant of all.” Anyone who might have been listening in on the conversation between Jesus and his disciples might have thought to ask at this point, “Jesus, when you say “all,” can you tell us exactly what you mean by that word?” But the disciples know exactly what he means. He’s already told them a few verses earlier in Mark chapter 10. When a group of mothers are trying to bring their babies to Jesus so that he might bless them, and the disciples act all indignant. “Come on, can’t you see that he’s in the middle of his sermon, that we’re trying to build the kingdom here? Take your kids out back until we’re done. Have a little respect!” Jesus, the most indignant of all, tells not the mothers, but the disciples, “You let the little children come to me! For without the children there is no kingdom!”

If you look at the financial information being provided today, you’ll see that we’re hoping to increase our overall church budget by about \$10,000 next year. Part of our hope in doing this is to be able to add, among some other things, a part-time staff person for children’s ministry. Now I’ve heard all kinds of reasons for why a position like this could be good for a church. “Well, that would be nice. Then the children will have someone to keep them busy every week while we’re in here having church.” Or, “It would be great to build up our children’s programming even more. After all, our children are our future.” Or my all-time favorite, “Maybe a paid person could teach the children how to behave in church.” But I got to tell you, I think the greatest benefit we stand to gain from having a position like this is not that the children might grow to become more like adults, but that we the adults might grow to become more like children. Moira and I will be increasing our pledge a little bit next year to try and help us grow as a church. I hope you might consider joining us.

I’ll end with this word. There is a common experience that everyone has at the end of their life. Whether you’re really old and have lived for a long time, or you’re young and maybe very sick, when we are nearing death, we all have a similar experience: we become helpless to ourselves. We can’t do for ourselves anymore, and something about this causes us to feel like we are less than we want to be, and maybe even less than we are supposed to be. What is worse for many people, we also become helpless to others. We tell ourselves that we are a burden. And this mindset does terrible things to us by making us question whether God is going to notice us. Believe me, I’m young, but I’ve seen a lot of death, and it’s one of the things I hear people say, “Do you think, when it’s time for me to go, God will

notice me? I mean, what if I haven't been good enough in my lifetime? What if I haven't loved enough? I'm just a burden." What I've noticed, though, is that it's hardly ever the young who say this. It's almost only the old who worry about being noticed by God. I think it's because the longer we live the more time we've had to convince ourselves that we're supposed to be able to do it all on our own right up until our last breath. There's not supposed to come a day when we can't drive anymore, or can't feed ourselves anymore, or can't get up off the toilet on our own anymore. Life has sold us a lie, though, and we've bought it. In making us think that becoming older is supposed to mean becoming independent, more self-made, we've bought into a lie. For Jesus wants us to know—I want us to know—that there will never come a day when God won't look upon us and say, "You are exactly what I had in mind when I created you. You are love. You are greatness. And to you, I am glad to say I belong." Amen.