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Larkspur, California
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Ephesians 1:3-10
“Contrasting Views of Stewardship”

My sermon today is my annual stewardship sermon in that it addresses our financial support of the church – for the mission of the church. Actually, every Sunday is Stewardship Sunday. We are stewards of God’s grace in all of life throughout the year. Today’s sermon supports this in a special Stewardship Sunday kind of way.

Everyone, it seems, knows Nelson Mandela. He was the first president in the new, free, democratic, racially and ethnically inclusive South Africa. His presidency was excellent, a hard act to follow.

His successor, Thabo Mbeki, had all the right credentials for leadership. He was well educated and had impeccable party affiliations. As president, he improved the country’s economy and worked tirelessly to unite African countries.

He had one flaw that many said undid his presidency. In the area of HIV/AIDS, he went overboard in criticizing the pharmaceutical industry for what he saw as gouging developing countries so he banned antiretroviral drugs in public hospitals.

Along with his health minister, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, he promoted holistic health cures alone for those living with HIV in spite of the fact that antiretroviral drugs were helping those living with HIV. Mbeki said extreme poverty was the cause of HIV/AIDS, not viral infection, and therefore poverty alleviation, good health and nutrition could heal those living with HIV.

My doctoral dissertation was on global HIV/AIDS because I wanted to learn more about my country, South Africa, which along with Sub-Sahara Africa was experiencing the highest incidents of HIV/AIDS in the world. I argued in my dissertation that Mbeki was victim to “either/or” thinking that conventional were drugs were bad and holistic health cures good. I argued for “both/and” thinking, that is, to value both approaches, conventional drugs *and* holistic health regimens.

Over 350,000 people died because of Mbeki’s “either/or” thinking. Most of these people would be alive today if Mbeki was a “both/and” thinker in this area.

I like “both/and” thinking. It works exceptionally well with the schema I found in my stewardship resources file called, “Contrasting Views of Stewardship.” No author is cited. Two views of stewardship are outlined.

View one, is “To Maintain the Church” and view two, “To Cultivate a Stewardship Community.” It became clear to me that if one adopted an “either/or” approach to this schema one would be dead in the water. It has to be “both/and”.

The first dimension of these two views defines stewardship. In the “maintaining the church” column, we read that stewardship is the process of raising funds to underwrite the church’s budget and recruit volunteers to fill the various officers and positions in the church’s organizational structure.

One gets the impression in this document as a whole that the expressions about maintaining the church are not as good as the expressions of cultivating a stewardship community. The latter are more dynamically expressed but, in my view, not as a replacement of the other view. It’s more like polishing the brass.

In the cultivating stewardship column, stewardship is defined as, “faithful, wise, and responsible participation in the ‘plan’ or ‘economy’ of God: ‘*a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.*’ (Ephesians 1:10).”

The latter is a little vague. The contrast is clearer when the assumptions for the definitions are outlined.

The assumption for “maintaining the church is this: “Stewardship is something one does by giving money, time, and talents to the church. The church is viewed as a worthy voluntary association that does good works. Individuals join who want to participate in that work. Stewardship is a *functional means* to the end of maintaining the church and its program and services. Stewardship is responsible giving.”

Isn’t that what we’ve done in this church for last 119 years? But it doesn’t tell the whole story. The story is rounded out in its so-called contrast.

The contrasting assumption states, “Stewardship indicates our distinctive Christian identity – *who* we are and *whose* we are. Through faith in Jesus Christ, we become ‘children of God’ and thus ‘joint heirs with Christ’ (Romans 8:17). As members of God’s household, we are called and empowered to participate in God’s redemptive mission in the world. Stewardship is responsible living.”

The problem with this contrast is that it divorces Stewardship Sunday, expressed primarily in the first approach, from the rest of the year. Yes, we emphasize the giving of money, time and talents this time of the year *and* we emphasize faithful living today and the rest of the year. It’s all one. The same fallacy, if you will, emerged in Jill Duffield’s notion of “resurrection” communicated in last Sunday’s sermon. I take some responsibility for communicating the notion since I let it slide in the sermon.

She said that resurrection is often relegated to one Sunday of the year, Easter Sunday, and forgotten the rest of the year as we allow secular values of death to frame our thinking. She makes a good point but any church worth its salt regards every Sunday as a Resurrection Sunday and encourages life in all its fullness at all times.

Stewardship is about responsible living *and* responsible giving. It is both/and.

Under the results category the contrast is most interestingly stated. I'm not sure if the "maintaining the church" description is entirely accurate.

It states, "Church members give 2½% of their income to the church. Congregations struggle financially. Churches are indistinguishable from other voluntary organizations in which 25% of the members give 75% of the money and 100% of the leadership, while 75% of the members make token gifts or none at all. The church is experienced as a burden to be carried, an obligation to be fulfilled. Churches must gear up every year with new gimmicks and ideas to raise money to meet the budget."

That's a sad expression. It's not *this* church. We're not perfect but there is commitment and energy here that far exceeds its scale.

The "cultivating stewardship community" contrast is more kind and affirming. It indicates who we are as church and why we support this wonderful community and its mission. I'll end the sermon here with praise to God whom we serve and hats off to this church and the church faithful throughout our 119 years.

The result of cultivating a stewardship community (which incorporates its contrast) is this: "A distinctive Christian stewarding community comes into being. Embodying a lifestyle of overwhelming gratitude and overflowing generosity, the church becomes exciting and challenging. Knowing who they are and whose they are, people are more articulate about their faith. Manifesting the gifts of grace in service and the fruit of the Spirit in love, the church becomes more inviting and more relevant. Financial support increases as a result of transformed visions, changed attitudes, and altered lives."

Important statements in medicine today are not conventional medicine verses holistic medicine. The words are complementary medicine and integrative medicine. In other words, both/and thinking. This way helps people and churches to thrive in every way. Amen.