

SPIRITUAL STEWARDSHIP Sermon November 7, 2010

Thirteen Moons is an historical novel set in early 19th Century America. Charles Frazier tells about the cruel treatment of the Native Americans when they were forced to give up their homes and go to territories the government set up for them. Units of soldiers would go from farmstead to farmstead giving the Indians a brief time to gather up their belongings and then would march them to a holding place, from which they would be sent to the territory to which they were assigned.

One morning Lieutenant Smith and his group were sent to the farm of an old Native American widow, living and managing her little farm alone. There were bundles of sage hanging upside down from her cabin eaves, fenced garden plots, corn, beans and squash growing in her fields, chickens scratching in the yard, and carefully pruned apple and peach trees. There was a creek running through her land and mountains all around. It was a beautiful place to be.

When she saw the soldiers, she knew what they intended, so she set about to put the belongings she could carry into a makeshift shoulder bundle. She told them she needed enough time to feed her chickens. Smith started to tell her that it was unnecessary because they would soon be someone's dinner, but being a rather sensitive guy, he decided the longevity of the chickens was not the point. The point for her, he realized, was just living out her stewardship until the very last moment.

I love this picture of stewardship. It isn't about the final result. It's about being true to one's calling. I've always liked the word. It conjures up images of cooperation and tending – taking good care of what we have been given. We could learn a lot from the Native Americans about this subject. They have a deep respect for the earth, the people and the animals – they have a sacramental view of life, that is they see the holy in everything. They take responsibility for tending what they have and spend a lot of time in conversation with the divine in all living things. A New Mexican Indian says, “How we live is our religion. From the time we get up in the morning ‘til we go to sleep at night, we treat each other with hospitality.” A man called White Eagle says, “An Indian learned to listen and understand the world around – disturbing not the harmony, balance, and beauty of the environment. Crossing a river, walking forest trails, Indians felt themselves one with the wind, water, mountains, birds.”

Well, I often think I would be able to maintain that sense of wonder if I lived out somewhere, closer to the earth, instead of surrounded by concrete, metal and technological gadgets that leech my time and energy. Since I'm not going to move anytime soon, I have to be intentional about spending time in nature, and recognizing that it is conceivable to have a sacramental view of just about everything in my world - including bridges and buildings, fabrics, lamps, and organic things I buy at the grocery store – though I have a harder time seeing anything holy about Brussel sprouts. Spiritual stewardship requires commitment. I wonder what difference it might make if we, like the Muslims were called to silence five times a day.

Sam Keen, former editor of “Psychology Today” and author of several books on philosophy and religion, has written a 2010 publication called In the Absence of God. Sam is about my age, and I have been with him in several workshops. I like the way he puts things, so I will be quoting him more than once. He says, “Depression, anxiety, and despair are only the latest

names we give to the feeling of living in an arid landscape from which the life-giving connection to the sacred has disappeared and the sense of personal meaning, and vocation has vanished. A life without obligation escapes the burden of discovering and developing the gifts that shape our individual destiny, but it also sacrifices the joy.”

In view of this I'd like to talk about some aspects of stewardship and calling that I think are important - under the headings of self, relationships and community; body, mind and soul.

Stewardship of our personal bodies means eating well, exercising, following up with any healing regimen, dressing warmly in the winter, good hygiene, and a certain amount of grooming. Stewardship of the family, group, or community body means spending time together, using good communication skills and working at healing conflicts that arise. In Corinthians, Paul talks about the church as a body that can be in harmony if everyone's gifts are honored and used appropriately. Our planet is a body that we have been careless about for a long time. We are beginning to find ways to heal that body, or at least to stop being mindless about it. Cooperating with the greening efforts is good stewardship.

We hear a lot today about stewardship of the mind. Studies are showing that people who stay active and use their brains, even for games and puzzles, are more likely to avoid dementia in old age. Whatever our number of years, whatever our limitations, we can intend to learn and grow as much as possible, by being bold in seeking out new experiences, by reading challenging books and articles that stretch our belief systems, and by listening to others who are willing to share ideas and discoveries. We have such a great opportunity today when Eric leads us in a workshop exploring truth.

A lot of the divisions in our world seem to me to be in arena of the mind – i.e. having belief systems that clash. Here is an area wherein humility could serve us well. The world is so chaotic today that there is a lot of free-floating anxiety. There is a temptation to grab at some certainty either by claiming to know the absolute truth and right moral path, or by claiming a superior knowledge, having studied the right theologians and thus having a more sophisticated position. Neither leads to cohesion or peace. It is next to impossible to have genuine dialogue with someone who is certain of the truth. So being a good steward of belief is being willing to listen and to honor someone else's point of view. At the same time, we have to have firm boundaries against those who would terrorize and kill because of their beliefs. There are no easy answers.

So, we need input from a divine source. This requires stewardship of the soul. We've had this motto for a few years, "God is still speaking!" Are we listening? There's a story about Mother Teresa. Someone asked her, "When you pray, what do you say to God?" She replied that she mainly listens. He asked what God says to her. She said, "Mainly he listens." The interviewer then said that he didn't understand. She said, "If you don't understand, I can't explain it to you."

The stewardship of prayer is very important and it may take many different forms, depending on one's concept of God. In our Beliefs workshop last summer, we found that even in this congregation there is wide variety in how members think about God. Some of us, like Mother Teresa simply commune with the Mystery and trust that we will be directed. Sometimes I like to go out in the park at dawn and just experience myself being held in the arms of God, the trees and the grass and the other walkers, and I bring to mind the people I want God to bless. Other times I need to see God as a person with whom I can share my concerns.

Maybe it doesn't matter whether we see God as a Ubiquitous Presence or The Ground of Being or Him or Her. What matters is that we imagine God in a way that makes it possible for us to commune and express our anxieties, and hopes, and petitions for blessing.

The Bible says the Holy Spirit intercedes for us even when we are not paying attention. Keen explains the relationship between one's spirit and the Holy Spirit as being the same relationship as particle to wave in Quantum Theory. British scientist, Rupert Sheldrake submits the idea that our minds and our souls are non-local – i.e. our prayer thoughts are not limited inside our skin, but travel through morphic fields to influence outcomes. This idea appeals to me, but like Sheldrake says, one cannot explain the unexplainable.

While most of us admit that we don't understand how prayer works, we believe it is an essential part of our stewardship, and like the Native American widow we do what we can do and leave the results to the Great Spirit.

Then, there's the stewardship of life – or as Albert Schweitzer called it: Reverence for life. We live in a reckless world with little reverence for human or animal life. People drive like maniacs (someone said we humans created our own predator – the automobile.) We ignore the disparity between the rich and poor – and people starve or die of terrible disease. We rage wars, and lots of people die. Then something amazing happens. Thirty-three miners are trapped in the depths of the earth and the Chileans spend millions to bring them out. The whole world is united in supporting and cheering the saving of these lives. The Chilean government demonstrated true reverence for human life.

Stewardship can often entail sacrifice. On Monday nights, I lead a large group of parents who have adopted special needs children. Not only have these kids been abandoned by their birth parents, but most of them have been in multiple foster homes and have been abused. Typically their behavior leaves a lot to be desired. They lie and steal, and some of them set fires or become violent. These adoptive parents sacrifice a lot to nurture these kids to adulthood. I have so much respect for their willingness to hang in despite hateful responses, and keep trying to learn better ways to manage and care for their children.

Every day we have many chances to honor life in our interactions with others. We can confirm them with smiles and warmth, or we can take out our own stresses on them - or we can ignore them. Inclusiveness is something we talk about a lot in this congregation. It doesn't just mean being open. It means being actively hospitable. I think we do this pretty well. Keen says, "The type of wisdom we get from friendship and love that may heal body, mind, and spirit involves vulnerability, self-knowledge, and the willingness to examine one's shadow."

Mostly, I've been talking about individual stewardship. What about the church? Sam says, "Emotions connected with the awareness of the sacred may be a matter of individual experience, but their celebration and enactment in rite and ritual requires a community."

We need our rites of passage, our rituals, our stories, our traditions to bring us together and to remind us of the meaning of life. And we are all responsible for the church and its functions. We take care of our campus, we take care of each other, and we extend an extravagant welcome to strangers. We hold each other accountable.

A lot could be said about stewardship in regard to our nation – our America, but I'm not going to go there this morning. Extreme partisanship interferes with stewardship, and we have a long way to go to figure out what to do about that. We need to put our best thinking in that direction.

In South Africa during apartheid, British writer Laurens van der Post, who grew up in the bush country, was giving a lecture in America about some of their vexing problems. A questioner asked, "What can we over here do to help?" His answer was, "Cultivate your own garden and its fragrance will be wafted across the ocean to us."

So, if we tend our own personal gardens and our church garden, there's a chance we might make the world smell better.