



STEWARDSHIP OF TIME (VOLUNTEERISM)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection – 1 Corinthians 4:1-13 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. (v. 2) Moreover, it is required of stewards that they should be found trustworthy. (v. 3) But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. (v. 4) I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. (v. 5) Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God. (v. 6) I have applied all this to Apollos and myself for your benefit, brothers and sisters, so that you may learn through us the meaning of the saying, 'Nothing beyond what is written,' so that none of you will be puffed up in favour of one against another. (v. 7) For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift? (v. 8) Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Quite apart from us you have become kings! Indeed, I wish that you had become kings, so that we might be kings

with you! (v. 9) For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to mortals. (v. 10) We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honour, but we in disrepute. (v. 11) To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, (v. 12) and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; (13) when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

There are churches in the African American context that periodically recognize the contributions of deacons, trustees (stewards) and auxiliaries, and some extend recognition to the small army of outreach volunteers without which authentic ministry could not function. Even though every ministry needs financial resources to provide the “margin for mission,” the priceless investment of volunteers is what allows every local church to impact the community through feeding and clothing programs, after school tutorials, mentoring, senior adult advocacy, recovery/support groups and other needed services. Christian volunteers are the “doers of the Word” (cf. James 1:22 - NRSV) and the hands and feet of Jesus in the world.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: 1 Corinthians 4:1-13

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

The Biblical model of volunteerism has never been more urgently needed to make the African American community whole than since the end of our nightmare of forced servitude in this country. There is a dangerously widening gap between those who have sustainable educational, economic, healthcare, and functional family resources and those who do not. Some churches compete over a dwindling black middle class base, in some instances abandoning urban centers, leaving masses of sisters and brothers to languish in despair. Some pastors seek to relocate to more profitable church settings because the work in certain areas of the country is overwhelming. But the question becomes, should we call ourselves the African American Church if we are not willing to address and meet the needs of African Americans and people of African descent around the world? Why should we continue to have so many churches, conventions and other organizations in our midst that are not helping our people live better lives?

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The church at Corinth was a challenging blessing for Paul who organized the congregation but soon discovered that cultural influences and spiritual immaturity, prevented the young church from fully appreciating the work of God through Christ and it's responsibility to become a relevant witness. In 1 Corinthians 4:1-2, Paul establishes healthy Christian identity. He begins with the phrase, “Think of us in this way ...” (v. 1). He suggests that how we think of ourselves will determine who we are. Therefore, if we are caretakers or “stewards of the mysteries of God,” we should be both humbled and

honored by the assignment. Paul revisits this concept in 2 Corinthians 4:7 when he states, “But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.”

He then presses the truth of the matter by challenging the church not to become preoccupied by status, position and temporal power. In verses 3-5, Paul confronts the superficial spirit of judgment exhibited by some in the Corinthian church. The apostles (Paul and Apollos) have been sized up for not having a great reputation among people. After all, Paul was a traveling missionary who was bi-vocational (he preached from place to place, planted small churches and made tents for a living). Nothing about what Paul did was especially glamorous. He would hardly be accused of being a celebrity preacher! He reminded them that only God can judge, and that at the appointed time. Even though Paul’s conscience was clear concerning human judgment, he was careful not to judge himself. “When Christ comes, he will judge the motives of every human heart and only then will people receive their just praise from God” (vv. 4-5). Yet, the key to healthy spirituality and the correct concept of stewardship lies in the recognition of ownership. In verse 7 Paul poses the following questions, “For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?” When we can correctly answer these questions, we then can roll up our sleeves and help somebody. And that is what a true volunteer does.

Notice how Paul compares Apollo and himself in inferior terms to those in the Corinthian community to help them come down from their superficial, self-righteous high (vv. 10-13): We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honour, but we in disrepute. (v. 11) To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, (v. 12) and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; (v. 13) when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day.

In this state how could Paul continue to be motivated? A steward (volunteer) cannot work for human appreciation or understanding. There must be a higher and greater motivation that moves a follower of Christ. Paul must have remembered what a mess he was until he met Jesus on the Damascus Road. That unforgettable encounter allowed him to remain focused on what he was called to do because of what God did for him. That too must be our focus.

Some believers regard stewardship only in financial terms. In fact, the Greek word for steward is *oikonomos*, or one who is responsible for running a household and managing property. It is from this Greek word that we derive our understanding of economy. However, to understand stewardship as a means of fundraising misses the point of our text, and also misses the meaning of a holistic relationship with God. Dr. Charles G. Adams, Senior Pastor of Hartford Memorial Baptist Church and Nickerson Professor of Ethics, Harvard University Divinity School, declares in chapter three (“Stewardship: A Way of Life”) of his New Members’ Orientation Manual: “Stewardship is not a program for raising money; it is a way of life by which spiritual values are pursued over material

values and a certain quality of life is deemed more desirable than the quantity of earthly possessions.” When we understand the all embracing nature of stewardship, we recognize that not only is “the earth (or the universe) the Lord’s, but we (all people) are as well.

As a result, a time-honored phrase remains true: “Service is the rent we pay for the space we occupy.” We owe God everything. Since we owe God, our redemptive space requires a three-fold tithe of time, talent and treasure. When Christians declare that they do not know their purpose, they may not understand salvation or may be refusing to deal with its implications. Salvation completes us and provides well-being. Salvation is a gift that keeps on giving. As a result, our salvation is not just personal but it is societal. In other words, we have been saved to share and serve. The words of John 3:16, “For God so loved the world ...” have added meaning in this context. Sisters and brothers who have been transformed and delivered understand what it means to give back. People who are not ashamed to show their scars make outstanding healers and helpers. And it is through the investment of time in others that many miracles happen. Also, let us not forget that it is just plain reasonable that we express our gratitude for not having to experience the harshness of war, hunger, poverty, homelessness, illiteracy, drug addiction or domestic violence by offering a hand up and not just a hand out. Jesus himself might say, “For such is the realm (kingdom) of heaven.”

Celebration

If no one ever pats us on the back or gives us a “high five,” what God has done for us in Christ Jesus is greater than any honor or designation that can be bestowed on us. After all, who else could wake us up and give us another day and another chance? That is the reason we sing, we work, we give, and we live. Ultimately, that is the reason God will use us to make a difference in this life and take care of us when this life is over. For this we are forever grateful.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: Stewards of God’s mysteries, gifts from God, rich stewards of God, the human court, kings, God bringing to light what was in darkness, apostles of God who are beaten and homeless; and

Sounds: Apostles being slandered, a kind response when slandered.

III. Other Comments for the Sermonic Moment

Quotes on Volunteerism

“If you insist on measuring yourself, place the tape around your heart rather than your head.”

-- Carol Trabelle

“God and angels don't get paid even though theirs is some of the most important work around. Ditto for volunteers.”

--Cherishe Archer

“The human contribution is the essential ingredient. It is only in the giving of oneself to others that we truly live.”

--Ethel Percy Andrus

“In order to motivate others, you must first become a source of motivation by yourself. It simply means that if you want to get anything done through others, you must first do it yourself.”

-- Hazrat Ilyas Attar Qadri

“A volunteer is a person whose charity is fidelity, who is faithful in an unfaithful world, grateful in an ungrateful world, giving when all about are grasping, listening when others need to tell about their fears and problems.”

-- from The Beacon, newsletter of Birthrite, South Africa

“When you volunteer it means you give yourself without any regression, without condition, but with full devotion...”

--Faith Tomaquin

“Volunteers are seldom paid; not because they are worthless, but because they are PRICELESS!”

--author unknown

“Someone asked the anthropologist Margaret Mead (1901-1978), "What is the first sign you look for, to tell you of an ancient civilization?" The interviewer had in mind a tool or article of clothing. Ms. Mead surprised him by answering, a "healed femur". When someone breaks a femur, they can't survive to hunt, fish or escape enemies unless they have help from someone else. Thus, a healed femur indicates that someone else helped that person, rather than abandoning them and saving themselves. Isn't that what we in philanthropy are all about? Healing femurs of one sort or another?”

“Volunteering is not a choice, it's a responsibility.”

--Ashley E. Hyder

“Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

--Margaret Mead

“Do all you can with what you have, in the time you have, in the place you are.”

--Nkosi Johnson, a Zulu boy, born into dire poverty while also being infected with AIDS, who died at the age of 12. Found in Jim Wooten's book, We Are All the Same: A Story

of a Boy's Courage and a Mother's Love.

“A volunteer is a person who is a light to others, giving witness in a mixed-up age, doing well and willingly the tasks at hand—namely, being aware of another's needs and doing something about it.”

--author unknown

“A volunteer is a person who remembers to do the thing to make other people happy, who takes the loneliness out of the alone by talking to them, who is concerned when others are unconcerned, who has the courage to be a prophet and to say the things that have to be said for the good of all.”

--author unknown

“The world is hugged by the faithful arms of volunteers.”

--Everett Mámor

“Wherever a man turns he can find someone who needs him.”

--Albert Schweitzer

“Unselfish and noble actions are the most radiant pages in the biography of souls.”

--David Thomas

“The breeze, the trees, the honey bees -all volunteers!”

--Juliet Carinreap

“There are two ways of spreading light - to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it.”

--Edith Wharton, Vesalius in Zante

“Those who can, do. Those who can do more, volunteer.”

--author unknown

“You may not have saved a lot of money in your life, but if you have saved a lot of heartaches for other folks, you are a pretty rich person.”

--Seth Parker

“It's easy to make a buck. It's a lot tougher to make a difference.”

--Tom Brokaw

“Volunteers do not necessarily have the time; they just have the heart.”

--Elizabeth Andrew

“Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it.”

--William Arthur Ward

“I’ve seen and met angels wearing the disguise of ordinary people living ordinary lives.”

--Tracy Chapman

“Something that has always puzzled me all my life is why, when I am in special need of help, the good deed is usually done by somebody on whom I have no claim.”

--William Feather