

STEWARDS OF FINANCES: The Glory and Purpose of Our Possessions

the Rev. Dr. DeWayne L. Davis
Lead Minister

May 2, 2021

Text: Acts 4:32–35

On April 4, 1860, an arsonist set ablaze and destroyed the building on Fourth Street and Nicollet that members of Plymouth Church had scrimped and saved to build. Shortly thereafter, Plymouth’s minister Henry Nichols died. As described by the writer Dave Kenney, their “finances were in shambles . . . Plymouth had fallen behind on their payments on . . . the site of their incinerated church home. Their creditors had foreclosed. They now had little, beyond their faith, to suggest they constituted a viable congregation.”¹ In surveying the history of Plymouth Church, I maintain that faith was the essential and indispensable variable that transformed what little Plymouth initially possessed into the material abundance and thriving ministry we possess today.

In the journey from that period to this age in the life of Plymouth Church, that faith was expressed much like it was in the early church in the aftermath of Jesus’ death and resurrection: through fellowship and stewardship. A simpler way of saying it is that Plymouth expressed her faith in the acts of joining and giving. If I can try to get it down to an even simpler characterization, I would argue that from that moment of loss, poverty, and disappointment, Plymouth did not allow money and possessions or lack thereof to tear the body apart or force the faithful to assume a posture of scarcity. Rather than languishing in the morass of what they had lost and did not have, our forebears kept their focus on what they were called to do: to be community and to be stewards. With a faith expressed in fellowship and stewardship and joining and giving, money and possessions brought people together who understood how to both embrace and share the abundance with which they were blessed.

In the Acts of the Apostles, the community of disciples and followers of Jesus that gathered in the aftermath of the resurrection were devoted to “spiritual communion and the sharing of possessions.”² In fact, the Greek word used to describe fellowship, participation, sharing, or contribution does not show up in the Gospels to describe the community gathered around Jesus. Rather it is here, when the Church is forming, endowed by the Holy Spirit and embodying a resurrected existence, we begin to see the expression of fellowship, participation, sharing, and contribution among the faithful. We begin to see a transformed existence marked by joining and giving. The writer of Luke-Acts declared that they “were of one heart and soul.” Before there was stewardship of finances, there was fellowship, a coming together as the people of God in a way completely unlike anything the world had previously seen.

So graced by the presence of God’s Spirit, so transformed by a mystery of resurrection that revealed God’s determination to do a new thing and to ensure life, this fellowship of faithful people conceived of a wholly

¹Dave Kenney, *Walking Together in All God’s Ways*, 33.

²Definition of “koinonia” in *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, 1960.

new economic way of living, a new way of arranging economics. Their fellowship called them to the vocation of stewardship whereby joining and giving are embodied faithfully rather than the taking, hoarding, and profiteering that characterized Temple and imperial economic practice. None one claimed private ownership of possessions but everything was held in common. God's grace—God's divine favor—was upon them. This wasn't about the creation of a clique, or social club, or even a mutual aid society. Because God favored them, they were compelled and inspired to favor to each other, rich or poor, slave or free, insider or outsider, the haves or the have-nots. Because resurrection testified to the promise of life, they would conform their lives and use their possessions as gifts that gave life. Is it any surprise to us that there was not a needy person among them?

I hope we do not miss how revolutionary this fellowship is; how unconventional it is to testify to resurrection in the face of an empire that killed their leader; how unprecedented it is to come together by the power of the Spirit of God to join and give as an expression of faith. There was pressure all around them: persecution, imprisonment, the world's resistance to the gospel, and attempts to silence the witnesses to God's deeds of power through Jesus. The early church is challenged on all sides. Pressure to conform. Pressure to stop testifying to resurrection. Pressure to stop loving, including, and embracing the poor. Pressure to reinforce the status quo. It would have been much easier to do things in ways familiar and non-threatening to the powers that be. Oh, but their faith . . . expressed through fellowship and stewardship becomes the source of service, community, and neighborliness in a world divided between rich *and* poor, slave *and* free, insider *and* outsider, the haves *and* the have-nots.

Faith expressed through fellowship and stewardship was an act of resistance against the greed, inequality, and hoarding of empire. It was a refusal to conform their way of being to the rules, practices, and wisdom of the empire. It was a refusal to use their gifts and blessings, and yes, money the way money had always been used . . . to dominate weaker people, to distance the rich from the poor, to maintain the status quo of inequality. It was a refusal to look away from poverty, desperate need, and the mutual support so that nobody is left behind.

Preachers, theologians, and biblical scholars have spilled tons of ink trying to convince us that what Luke describes in this historical account of the early church could not be what it was really like. According to them, this community is only an idealized picture of fellowship we can't be expected to follow. Theories that go far beyond the text or even biblical history abound, attempting to show that this "communistic" experiment did not last long or was the reason there was so much poverty in the early church. It would be a mistake to assume that God's grace does not and cannot make possible the kind of fellowship and stewardship in which money and possessions are held in common and there are no needy among them. After all, God has never withheld from us and Jesus never hoarded abundance.

Transformed by God's grace, the glory and purpose of our money and possessions are not expressed by a practice of taking, hoarding, and profiteering but by a practice of solidarity and mutuality. This is what economics looks like when people who know God's grace respond in faith. How we steward our finances is not charity or philanthropy . . . this is solidarity. There were no needy among them because as soon as need arose, possessions, those sources of money and wealth, were given to meet the need. There were no needy among them because those with possessions made sure that there would be no scarcity. There were no needy among them because in the call to stewardship of their finances in light of resurrection, the glory and purpose of our possessions serve to bring life to all God's children.

We have inherited from that early church the words fellowship and stewardship, whose cutting edges we have dulled and whose revolutionary impulses we have softened. We are not immune to the pressures of the marketplace that encourage us to act only out of self-interest and profit. We are conditioned by an economy that privileges the amassing of wealth over the sharing of abundance with neighbors. We are immersed in a worldview that tells us that there is never enough of anything. And yet, we can reclaim the power and promise in our work and witness that was demonstrated in that Acts church and Plymouth

Church in 1860, which had only their faith expressed in joining and giving to constitute them as a viable congregation. As we come out of this liminal period of a global pandemic, I pray that we do not allow the pressures of the marketplace overwhelm a faith expressed in fellowship and stewardship; that as we steward our money and possessions faithfully, we do not see these gifts solely for our comfort and glory but use them to bring life that resurrection makes possible.