

SHOWERS OF BLESSINGS

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October 31, 2021, Stewardship Sunday

Texts: Ezekiel 34:25–26; 2 Corinthians 8:1–7

Our understanding of stewardship in the church is shaped by the Greek word *oikonomia*, which refers to stewardship or management of a household or God's stewardship or management of the creation or the universe. There are several familiar biblical narratives we use to talk about stewardship, and I want to flesh out that understanding of stewardship more vividly by talking about our household. Specifically, while our notion of household is roughly understood in terms how we manage our money and possessions, I want us to conceive of the "household" in the language of blessing, as gift, as possibility, as a revelation of abundance that implicates us in the stewarding of it and in how we respond to it as blessing. I maintain that our "households," our abundance, are revelations of God's intent for us and for the creation that require a faithful response. What does a faithful response to abundance look like?

Go back and look at Israel's experience in wilderness and exile. In anticipation of a return from exile, when the prophets offer prophecies of deliverance for God's people, those prophecies reveal a consistent picture of God's intent for all of creation. No matter what led to the breach in covenant, no matter how long or how oppressive their time in exile was, upon the return of the people, there is reconciliation with God. In affirming and confirming the promise of reconciliation, God offers a vision of God's shalom, God's peace, fullness, completeness, well-being for the people. Ezekiel's prophecy of deliverance is a vivid illustration of both God's intent and the people's expectation of a reconciled covenant with God. Through Ezekiel, God declares "I will make them and where they live a blessing; there will be showers of blessings." God's promise of showers of blessings is the theological context in which the churches in Macedonia and Corinth know themselves as reconciled and know what is expected of them when Paul requests their participation in the collection. As reconciled to God, they now must discern how they are going to respond to the grace of God, to the showers of blessings emanating from God's promise of fullness, completeness, well-being.

The passage we read today from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians makes clear that for as long as there have been churches, there has been the need for church leaders to make appeals for taking up a collection. When the apostles who accompanied and served with Jesus in his earthly ministry affirmed Paul's mission, they told him to "remember the poor;" which Paul declared that he was most eager to do (Gal 2:10). So first, to the churches in Corinth, Paul made an appeal for a commitment. I envision them doing what we do only in their cultural and historical context: making a stewardship appeal and having people indicate their commitments. From this letter, it looks like the members of the church in Corinth early on were eager to fill out the pledge cards and indicated their intention to commit with enthusiasm, but their actual participation came up a little short. They either did not follow through or lost interest in the work.

As a reminder to the Corinthians, Paul writes what looks a little like a fundraising letter asking them to excel in the act of giving and telling them how the churches in Macedonia responded to the appeal to commit and to give. To inspire the more prosperous Corinthians to participate in the collection, Paul

points out that the Macedonian churches may have had more practical and financial reasons for being less than generous. The Macedonians have experienced hardship, persecution, poverty. But their condition of suffering does not shake their identity as a reconciled people of God with all the joy and showers of blessings, spiritual if not material, that come with it. Their response? Out of extreme poverty, they overflowed in a wealth of generosity. They not only committed and gave, but they did so of their own will, begging to participate when everyone would have understood if they could not participate.

And if the example of the churches in Macedonia doesn't inspire the Corinthians to participate, then perhaps a reminder of how grace, how God's showers of blessings have inspired them over the years. The Corinthians have excelled in faith, in speech, in knowledge, and in eagerness, so they know how to excel in the act of giving, to respond faithfully to an extravagantly generous God, who has showered them in spiritual and material blessings. Yes, the Macedonian and Corinthians households are gifts, possibilities, revelations of abundance, showers of blessings. But remember God's promise. Not only will God bless where they live; God also makes them a blessing. What will their responses be? The Macedonians gave willingly and eagerly.

I see Plymouth Church reflected in the experiences of both the church in Macedonia and the church in Corinth. Someone pointed out to me that, over a period of six years, Plymouth went from a senior minister transition to an emotional debate about our embroideries to the interruption of our community life due to COVID-19. We have known the ordeal of affliction and the experience of rupture in the calm of church unity. And Plymouth is also known for its excellence. God has made us and made this church a blessing. We excel in faith, in speech, in knowledge, and in eagerness. This community knows about our works: art and music, our intellectual and spiritual programming, our social justice commitments and campaigns.

The Plymouth household has known showers of blessing. We have known the ordeal of affliction. And both experiences have prepared us to share in the ministry of giving and the discipline of stewardship. It is not a boast to testify that Plymouth Church is a blessing, a gift, a possibility, a revelation of abundance. It is a question of response. Can this material blessing be a means to cultivate faith, nurture connection, and amplify love? Can our generosity be both a blessing and a witness to the world looking for beloved community? We are called to be good stewards of the great blessings God bestows upon us, sharing our bounty with our communities of faith. It is true—we would not be able to bring this ministry to you without the generous offerings of time, talent, and treasure. But there is also the matter of who and whose we are—God's beloved—reconciled in covenant with a generous God who makes us and where we live a blessing and who showers us with blessings. That's the theological context for our stewardship, and it flows out of divine abundance.

We can go all in as faithful stewards, not as a transactional enterprise, but as testament of what we value, who we trust, and where our hearts truly are—in God. We have so much to offer to God and God's work, both material and spiritual. Our lives, our trust, our gratitude will determine how we show up in this ministry. Our giving, whether time, talent, or treasure, will reflect the wealth within—our lives, our trust, our gratitude. We have been blessed with great abundance, showered in blessings even in the midst of a global pandemic and through so much change and uncertainty, recognizing that God's movement and purposes are larger and more generous than we can ever imagine. Now is our time to discern how to respond to God's generosity, trying over and over again to live, act, and worship as faithful stewards over God's good gifts. Behold, we have been made a blessing; there have been showers of blessings flowing to us. I pray our response will be willing generosity. May it be so.