

Growing Stewards Step by Step

Twelve Devotions and Prayers

Stewardship is a spiritual issue not a financial issue. The journey to being a good steward has many steps. For some people this starts with reading, reflection and prayer. Here are twelve devotions for this purpose. The inspiration for these writings is taken from *Stepping Stones of a Steward* by Ron Vallet (Eerdsmans Publishing; Grand Rapids, MI; © 1989)

Devotion 1

Realizing How Much God Loves You

Luke 15:11-32

How do you see God's love in your daily life? Jesus' parable of the prodigal is an example of the deep and profound love between a father and his son (and, God with God's people). This parable could also be named the parable of the prodigal father. It is the father who is a central character. The selfish and jealous behavior of the two sons is a sharp contrast to the loving behavior of the father. Similarly, God's most basic character is love.

What experiences in life are brought to memory by this parable? Has there been a time in your life when you wanted to go off to a far country? It was not unusual for younger Jewish sons to venture into the Dispersion. Centuries later in colonial England, it was not unusual for younger sons to venture to the colonies to start their life. And in our own country, it was not unusual for younger sons to respond to the challenge, "Go west, young man."

These ventures were often undertaken because there was sense of love and security at home, and a loving relationship with God. The life of Jesus was a venture to live in a "new creation", a "new age". It was difficult for the disciples to leave their settings and follow Jesus. It was even more difficult to grasp the significance of Jesus' teachings. Yet as their experiences evolved there were revelations that showed God's love and presence in every day life.

The older son struggled to see the loving relationship with his father and brother upon the brother's return. Yet the father's love was free, unmerited and unconditional to both sons. It is this kind of love that God has for God's people.

The breadth of this love is expressed in words penciled on the wall of a narrow room in an asylum

*Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were every stalk on earth a quill,
And ev'ry man a scribe by trade:
To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry;
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
Tho' stretched from sky to sky.*

“The Love of God”
Lillenas Publishing Co,
Kansas City, MO 1917

In reflecting on the breadth of God’s love, what steps might you take in your life to enhance your realization of God’s love?

Let us pray: Lord God, you are a loving Creator and Provider. Help us to see your presence in our daily life, in the gift of life, in the gift of your Son Jesus Christ and in the Body of Christ. Give us the vision to look beyond our personal desires and needs. Give us the sensitivity to hear your word above our daily activity. Open our eyes too, to the times when we are like the older son, looking for the best robe and the fatted calf, only wanting for ourselves. May the Holy Spirit give us guidance to see your loving presence and will in our life. Amen.

Devotion 2

Feeling the Joy of God's Presence

Luke 15:1-10

Where do you find joy in your relationship with God? Is it listening to special music at worship? Is it sharing in communion? Is it at the birth of child? Is it in finding something you have lost for a long time?

The two parables in these verses are about finding something that is lost. At the time of Jesus, a hundred sheep were a sign of prosperity. These sheep were often kept for eight to nine years for their wool. The shepherd would always walk ahead of the sheep to scout out danger. The shepherd cared about all the sheep. If one were lost, it was important to find it.

We have all probably had valuable coins. When I was a boy, I remember my uncle gave me an 1887 silver dollar. In the years that followed, he gave me newer silver dollars. My collection grew to more than a dozen coins. I used to look at these coins and wonder how many places they had been. Who had touched them? One day I noticed a coin was missing. I searched until I found it. I experienced the joy of finding that which was lost.

A key word in each of the stories is “lost”. Have you ever felt lost in your relationship with God? I remember traveling alone in Europe while in college. There were many new faces and places, but none of these did I associate with the God I grew up with. I felt lost. It was comforting to find those places where I could connect with God – a friend here, a church there. It was because I was lost that I appreciated the love and security of God all the more. So too God feels this joy when we are found again.

Let us pray: Gracious Lord, there are times when each of us feels lost – living in a dark place, separated from your Word and loving care. We ask you to keep searching for us. Do not lose patience. We ask that your voice speak louder than the sounds of distraction around us. Do not lose perseverance. We ask that your Spirit touch our heart and mind. Remind us that you are our God and we are your people. May we share in your joy when we are found, and may we share the joy of your presence with others as a witness to you, our Lord. Amen.

Devotion 3
Responding to God's Overtures
Matthew 13:1-9

Corporations spend millions of dollars each year producing media to reach their audience. In most cases the purpose is clear: use our products or services. The clever jingles, lines and vignettes are intended to give us a particular glimpse of reality. Yes, some of the Super Bowl commercials are entertaining. And just who does come up with those ideas? It must be a writer or director somewhere. These intriguing, targeted messages may suggest it is easy to listen and challenging to create, write and produce. However, Jesus suggests the opposite.

What happens when you go to a meeting with a large number of participants? I was recently at a conference with almost sixty people. We addressed some difficult issues about our future direction and working relationships. There were many interpretations of the initial presentation, and even more when individuals began sharing their reactions. Jesus knew listening would be difficult. Yet it is through careful and faithful listening that God makes overtures to each one of us.

We see this clearly in the parable of the soils. The four kinds of soils may be characteristic of the four kinds of hearts in those who listen to God's word. Some of the seed fell on the trodden path. The soil was hard to penetrate. The seeds danced in the

wind and were readily eaten by birds. This soil represents the hard-hearted listener. This is the person who has closed their heart and mind to the will of God. All may seem so clear, yet there are no roots for a foundation. As in Jesus' day, there were many people whose assumptions and prejudices would not allow them to conceive of Jesus as the Messiah.

Some of the seed fell on rocky soil. Seeds can become lodged in this ground and take some root. However, soon the roots reach impenetrable rock and are unable to reach the necessary nutrients. Denied this nourishment the plant withers in the sun and dies. In the parable this seed represents the listener with a shallow heart. Everything may look good on the surface, but underneath there is a barrier to spiritual growth. The listener is unable to sustain their faith.

Jesus observed that some seed fell into ground that was infested with weeds. There was both good seed and weed seeds. With nourishment both would sprout and flourish. Eventually however, the resources of the soil would be sapped by the weeds. The good seed would be crowded out and die. In our culture many voices strive to get our attention. We listen intently for the Word of God and the voice of the Holy Spirit. However, the distractions are many. The Gospel of Jesus Christ can be choked out. God calls us to listen selectively and set our priorities clearly.

Devotion 4

Understanding God's Purpose

Luke 7: 31-35

Do believe God created everything for a purpose? Have you discovered your purpose in life? Has that purpose changed as you have grown from one stage to another in life? As the New Year arrives, what do you see as your purpose(s) in the coming year?

Often people define their purpose in terms of what they want or need. "I want a vacation." "I want a new house." "I need a new car." We often want what we cannot have, at least not immediately. We sometimes forget that we have matured into adults within society and struggle to leave "childish things" behind.

When we look beyond material wants or desires, we often observe adults do not escape from engaging in childish behavior. Even church conversations can lead to disputes where one person's desire or way reflects a narrow self interest.

The discussion may focus on worship style or worship schedule. What is most comfortable and convenient for you? The discussion may focus on how much someone should be paid or how much should go to missions. What is affordable for me? The list goes on. What examples can you think of in your setting?

This struggle extends beyond our local congregation. States and countries engage in the same conversations. Remember the Cold War. Look at the direction conversations are taking between the West and Middle East today. Simple listening reflects the frustration - "We cannot trust them."; "They never keep their word"; "They got what was coming to them", "If we don't have enough arms and troops, then we cannot control the outcome. What would happen then?". Each party feels the other is naïve and unrealistic.

Where is God's purpose in all this? In this parable from Luke, Jesus compared the "people of this generation" to the children arguing in the marketplace about the game they would play. One group wanted to play weddings. Another group wanted to play funerals. They taunted each other. Each group wanted to get their own way.

A key to understanding this parable actually comes in the preceding verse, "but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves" (Luke 7:30). Having rejected the purposes of God, these leaders also rejected the messengers of God – John the Baptist eating no bread and drinking no wine and Jesus eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners. One seemed too serious. The other was not serious enough. Both gave their life for the same God.

The purpose of God often does not make sense unless we understand a common assumption – God is the Creator and Owner of everything. We hear this in Psalm 24:1, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it ...". Yet in ancient Israel leaders thought they controlled the religious institutions, the rules and the regulations. When John the Baptist and Jesus called for acceptance and repentance to God's rule, they met strong resistance. Have we seen this in our own time?

As God's stewards in this world, we recognize God's love. We experience the joy of God reaching out and touching our life. We respond to God through graceful and grateful living. And, we are willing to be guided by God's purpose. Within this covenant relationship, we realize we are not in control, but God is. As stewards we are the servants entrusted with what God has given each of us. In Philippians 2:5-11, we read how Christ emptied himself and took the form of a slave. As we pursue our purposes in life, we too empty ourselves from being in control and become transformed into a servant.

As you think about your purpose(s) for the coming year, how are you being a servant of God? As you consider major decisions in the life of your congregation, how willing are you to give up control to God's will? Yes, God is making overtures to us every day. Are we listening? Are we open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit? Or, are we like the Pharisees and lawyers who rejected both God's purpose and messengers? The answers begin with accepting our role as God's faithful stewards and servants.

Let us pray: Lord, you have spoken to us through the Word and the Spirit, yet we often struggle to listen and understand. Sometimes like the Pharisees we are overcome by our own desire to control the rules and regulations. We forget that you are the Creator and Owner of all. We ask you to be patient with us. We ask you for the strength to let go of our selfish purposes, and to embrace your way for our life. We are called to be your steward and servant. Guide us as we make our daily decisions and touch the lives of others in ways that are acceptable to you. We ask this in the name of Jesus, Our Savior, Amen.

Devotion 5

A Stewardship Devotion...

Being Aware of God's Willingness to Give

Luke 11:1-10

Have you ever been awakened in the middle of the night? Perhaps it was a telephone call, a knock on the door or the siren of an ambulance going by. As you know, it is a jarring experience. The first few seconds are a time of disorientation as you try to figure out what is going on. You may become concerned about someone's safety. You may experience a moment of fear as you reach for the telephone or go to the door.

This is the situation Jesus describes in this parable from Luke. What would you have done if you got to the door in the middle of the night and a neighbor was asking for food? Perhaps we be upset. However, Jesus is using this situation to illustrate our relationship with God. If a person would respond to the knock on the door because of the persistence of a neighbor, will not God, who does not slumber, answer our prayers? God is a like gracious and loving parent or friend, always there to listen and respond. Ask, and it will be given to you.

Jesus also uses this parable to describe God's willingness to provide. In the minds of many people, there is an unwritten rule of economics that "scarcity" will always be present. This "scarcity thinking" can often set the tone for many conversations and decisions. However, the Gospel radically subverts this assumption. There may be a lack of resources in some circumstances, but there are also many assets. God does provide. Often there is more than enough available if we look for what God has provided. This provision is not a reward, but it is available so God's work can be done. What are the gifts or assets that God has given your congregation?

Within this parable there is also a message of God's willingness to share. Why? Because through baptism we have been accepted into the Body of Christ. We are both servants and stewards. In Philippians (2:7) Paul describes how Christ "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant," and was obedient even to death. We have the privilege of sharing in the Body of Christ. Ours is a voluntary decision. God does not force us.

Lastly, God is ready to respond to our requests. Ask, and it will be given to you. God has given us gifts and assets far beyond our understanding. Why is it then that we squander so much of our time and what God has given us? Because often we are only looking for what we want in life, not for what God is ready to provide. We look for the material and God offers the spiritual. We look for ourselves and God invites us to live for others. God is ready to give us what we ask for. Are willing servants ready to accept the responsibilities that accompany what God provides?

Unlike the visitor at the door, God does not pound a way into our life. God waits for us to respond. How is God knocking on your door today? Are you willing to receive and share what God is offering to you? Your willingness to receive can open the door to the next stage in your faith journey.

Let us pray: Provider God, we are often reluctant to respond to your invitation. We are caught up in our sleep, our daily activities and our relationship with things. May your Spirit startle us, as in the middle of the night, to see your presence and your gifts. May we have an open heart to receive, and in so doing accept our responsibility to respond. May your Spirit guide us to share the resources you provide to do your will in our life, our congregation, our community and beyond. Amen.

Devotion 6

Accepting God's Resources

Luke 14:25-35

Whether building a tower or building a life, it is important to first consider the cost. One interpretation of this parable focuses on knowing how much the tower will cost before starting to build. The necessary resources can be determined. The cost for building a tower is concrete and measurable.

The cost of following Jesus is more than any building. For followers of the living God, Jesus must take the primary place that supercedes other family, friends, dreams and ambitions. The demands of carrying the cross of Christ are dear. The cost of discipleship is great – “none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possession”.

I recall working with a congregation on a building appeal. Some members had a clear vision of what God was calling this congregation to do in ministry. These members were willing to take a step in faith. Some members would not support breaking ground until every cost detail was worked out and the money for the whole project was in the bank. These members could only see the limited financial resources available the membership.

This congregation did not ask members to give up all their possessions. However, the leaders did ask each member to prayerfully consider a faith commitment with some financial sacrifice. The leaders did ask members to explore creative ways to make a new facility for ministry possible. This invitation led one member to donate the heating and air conditioning equipment valued at more than \$250,000. By the end of the appeal, the majority of members had made a contribution and God's work was alive in new ways.

As faithful stewards this parable gives us hope in two ways. First, God will provide. God has the resources to build both towers and lives. And, when we are called to undertake a task for mission, it is God who will provide the resources. An appropriate question may be, "Are we willing to receive what God has to offer us?"

Second, it is freeing to know that everything belongs to God. We came into this world with nothing and will leave with nothing. As a disciple and steward, we are called to be faithful with what God has entrusted to us. It is not about collecting our own resources so that we can have what is needed, but accepting God what provides and using it for God's work.

Let us pray: O, God
We've wasted
we've complained
we've grumbled.
We've misused our resources
We've confused
our needs
with our wants.
For these sins
Father, forgive us.
Help us
Reset our priorities
According to Your will.
Amen.

By Norma Johnson
Lobatse, Botswana

Devotion 7

Recognizing Your Time & Talents ***Matthew 25:14 - 30***

In the course of a person's faith journey, God makes many resources available, including time and talent. Through the parable of the talents, God makes it clear that your talent is whatever God has entrusted to you. One of the tasks on your journey is to discover, explore and use these talents. And, if you are called to lead, then accompany others in their journey.

I recall meeting Lynn at a council meeting. As the only woman on the congregation council, she stood out. As a business woman in the community she managed an office of more than thirty people, but had not taken a strong leadership role in the congregation. Her new role as stewardship chairperson would be a challenge. I was invited to accompany her on this journey for more than a year.

The journey began by discovering the talents God had given her for ministry - leadership and administration. As a founding member of the congregation, others sensed her passion for ministry, but only recently had looked to her as a leader. While very capable in planning and leading meetings, she struggled with the transition from a business context to a church setting. As a life long Lutheran, she had become a faithful steward, but was uncertain how to be a steward leader. Lynn's talents were not buried, they were often not polished for the setting in which she was being asked to lead.

In the months that followed, we explored how to use her gifts. She made several proposals to the congregation council and met with the pastors to talk about stewardship issues. Lynn raised questions about stewardship practices and suggested ways to expand or improve the reporting of stewardship activities. In this process she used her talents while striving to be sensitive to the faith practices and feelings of others. She worked with and through committees in the congregation. Through regular prayer she was inviting the Holy Spirit to guide her in using her talents.

After about one year, a new spirit was evident in the congregation. It was not Lynn alone. It was the Spirit working through the pastors, leaders and members. There was a desire to rediscover the missional spirit of the past. People engaged more openly in conversation about what it meant to be a member and to make a faith commitment to their ministry.

A few months later, we began to have conversations about accountability. As disciples how are we held accountable for the talents entrusted to us? What are appropriate ways to invite others to also be accountable? She approached the congregation council with these questions. Conversations became deeper and more faith filled. A few months later Lynn was asked to serve as the first woman president of the congregation.

As you continue on your faith journey, the question you may ask yourself is how can you use your resources of time and talent for God. You may not discover the call to be president of your congregation, but you can polish the talents God has given you and use them to do God's work.

Let us Pray: Dear Lord, help us discover the talents you have entrusted to each of us. May the Holy Spirit guide us in how to use these talents to do your work in our community and beyond. May we learn to be accountable to you for these gifts. And, when possible may we accompany others in discovering how to use their gifts. Amen.

Devotion 8

Money as a Means of Serving God and Helping Others

Luke 12:13-21

One of the resources God has entrusted to each person is money. This parable clearly portrays the danger of self-delusion that can occur in the use and management of that money. The rich man in the parable was blessed with a farm that produced fine crops to the point the barns were overflowing. Yet the rich man was looking for more security so he built bigger barns for the yield of future harvests.

Was this rich man successful? By all accounts at that time yes. He had accomplished what most people of his time had only dreamed of. But through this parable Jesus challenges the hearer not to think of oneself, but to recognize that treasures stored in this world are “not rich toward God”. Reading the text, note how many times “I “ and “me” are used. How easy is it to become infatuated with oneself.

The example of wealth used in this parable has been lived out in many ways in the centuries that followed. In 1871 Mark Twain wrote a piece entitled, “The Revised Catechism”. It talked about the hold money can have on a person’s life. As excerpt reads as follows:

What is the chief end of man? – to get rich.
In what way? – dishonestly if we can; honestly if we must.
Who is God, the one and only true?
Money is God. Gold and Greenbacks and Stock –
father, son and ghosts of same, three persons in one;
these are the true and only God, mighty and supreme.

The true test of our use of money as a resource entrusted to us is the lifestyle we live. In today’s society it is often difficult to answer the question, how much is enough? There is a cultural drive to obtain and accumulate. We are blessed that in the United States and some other countries this accumulation is possible. Yet in many countries it is not. It seems that an abundance of things supports a desire to want and have more. Perhaps this is reflected in a giving pattern that the higher the household income, the less a household is likely to return to God.

What is your vision of enough? Does it include serving God and help others? In this parable Jesus reminds us that God may come at any time and ask for an accounting of our time, talents and money. Will you be prepared? Being rich toward God is worth more than all the barns in the world.

Let us Pray: Dear Lord, help us to clearly see the monetary resources you have entrusted. May we discover through our faith how much is enough. May our gratitude be reflected in what we return to you. And, may we use these gifts as a tool to serve God and help others. Amen.

Devotion 9

Being Willing to Take Risks

Matthew 13:44-45

Can you empathize with the farmer described in this passage? What are you willing to go and sell everything for so you can obtain it? The first step is to identify what you want to obtain. This means establishing a priority. What is most important to you? At one time I might have said a new car. However, I have had several new cars and have come to realize each one loses its attraction. At another time I might have said a new house. Again, after a number of years, I realized it is the relationships and events that happen within the house that are most important.

If you made a list of what was most important to you today, what would it look like? What items would be at the top of the list? What would be at the bottom? Would your priorities be different than five years ago? How about five years from now?

In some form or another, each person goes through this process almost every day. One moment we are dreaming about the possibilities in life and the next we are trying to keep focused on realistic priorities. The basic question is who or what is your treasure?

Reflecting further on this parable, it has a different meaning if we consider God as the leading character and not ourselves. What does it mean if God is willing to sell everything to obtain our heart and our soul? What would God be willing to do to obtain this priceless gift? Is it possible that God would be willing to take a risk, to give up the life of a son to attain this gift? This truly is a great sacrifice. How willing might you be to make a similar sacrifice?

As believers in Jesus Christ, there are times when it is appropriate for us to take risks. This may be in our own life or in the ministry of our congregation. As people of God and stewards of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we are given both the permission and responsibility to break out of the molds of this world in order to open the door for God's reign. We are the field, the pearl and the treasure that God so loves, and thus entrusts us to take risks.

As Paul Tournier wrote, "What I have to do is put my signature at the foot of a blank page on which I will accept whatever God wishes to write. I cannot predict what he will put on this blank contract as my life proceeds – but I give my signature today." Have you done this already? Are you willing to do this? When we realize that we are the treasure for whom God gave up Jesus, then perhaps we can treasure doing God's will, whatever the risk.

Let us Pray: O God, whether farmer, merchant, leader or follower, help us to realize that we are each your treasure. We each struggle with our priorities. Help us to remember the sacrifice you have made and discern your will. As stewards of the Gospel, open our hearts to the Holy Spirit and empower us by your grace so the risks we take will use our gifts for the sake your reign in the church and the world. Amen.

Devotion 10

Expressing Love to Others in Gratitude

Luke 10:25-37

How do you express love to others in gratitude? You have probably heard the story of the Good Samaritan many times. Some would suggest it is about helping others. Some states have adopted “Good Samaritan” laws that exempt doctors and some other people from any liability when they provide emergency assistance to someone. While the intent of such laws is to reduce risk, this may not be what Jesus intended when he told this story.

Simply giving aid to someone in need may only treat the symptoms of the distress or emergency. Some would suggest the parable is about taking risks. Both the priest and the Levite in the parable are religious leaders and would have taken considerable risk to assist the man who had fallen into the hands of robbers. Why? Perhaps the victim was faking injury to lure them into a trap. Perhaps they were concerned that the robbers were nearby and might attack them also. Perhaps they thought the man was already dead and did not want to touch the body and be considered unclean for seven days. This would prevent these religious leaders from carrying out their responsibilities in the temple. Ritual was above human need. In each of these possibilities, the two were unwilling to take the risk of helping someone they did not know.

Remembering the original context of the question from the lawyer, “...what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus responded by questioning the lawyer about the law – “What is written in the law?” The lawyer responded, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself”. Wanting to justify himself, the lawyer questions further, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus’ response through this parable indicates the most unexpected person, the Samaritan, could be the one to help a person they do not know.

Today, we may be just as cautious to stop and help someone we do not know. Who do you identify with in this parable? Is it the lawyer, the victim, the robbers, the priest, the Levite, the inn keeper or the Samaritan? What does this suggest about the risk you are willing to take? Who are you willing to stop and help?

Through God's love each person is encouraged to show spontaneous and unqualified love, even to a stranger. The boundaries are not set by the rituals or rules of religious practice. We are encouraged to take risks because of our faith and the love of God. In doing so we both defend the poor and the weak, and seek to establish justice in society.

Let us Pray: Dear Lord, there are so many people laying beside the road of life – the injured, the sick, the less fortunate. Help us to see your love in our life that we may have the strength to take risks and reach out to help others. We may not know these neighbors, and yet they are part of your beautiful creation. May we have the strength to express love to those who are weak and pursue justice within our society. Amen.

Devotion 11

Coming to Terms with Life's Realities

Luke 18:1-8

This passage is often referred to as the parable of the “dishonest” or “unjust” steward. For some this is the most troubling of all the parables Jesus told. On the one hand a steward is discharged in response to charges that goods were being wasted. Yet in the second half of the parable, this dishonest steward is commended for shrewdly discounting the debts of others to the same master. How are these two actions reconciled?

In the first half of the parable Jesus reminds us that we are all stewards of what God has entrusted to us. Yes, everything. If we are not faithful stewards, we can be discharged. Perhaps more appropriately, what we have been put in charge of can be taken away. Has this ever happened to you? I can remember times that I did not use my money wisely and some of it was taken away. We frequently hear in the news about people who have been poor stewards and their position and status are taken away. Yes, this can happen. We are encouraged to always be faithful and responsible stewards of what is entrusted to us.

It is the second half of this parable that may be more difficult to understand. Here Jesus is not commending the specific actions of the unjust steward, the reducing of the debts, but commending the shrewdness in taking action. Acting shrewdly means having a discerning awareness of the situation or reality and a willingness to act in skillful ways. The unjust steward assessed the reality of the crisis facing him and acted promptly with foresight.

This was not the only occasion Jesus illustrated this point. In Matthew 10:16, as he was sending out the disciples, Jesus said, “be wise as serpents and innocent as doves”. The word translated as “wise” in this context is the same word as the “shrewd” in the parable. Therefore, Jesus is encouraging and praising disciples to be both devout in their purpose and skillful in their planning.

In Scripture there are many other places where Jesus admires shrewdness in managing affairs, both in work and in love. It is our ability to face reality and skillfully deal with crisis situations that also reflect our ability to be a just and honest steward.

Let us Pray: Dear Lord, help us to recognize and appreciate the gifts you have entrusted to us. May we understand their purpose and use them in ways you would approve. We know we are not always good managers. May we be prudent in assessing reality, patient in addressing a crisis and wise in our decision making. Help us to be faithful to your calling, skillful in planning and responsible as your just and honest stewards. Amen.

Devotion 12

Growing as God Works in Your Life

Luke 5: 34-38

These twin parables by Jesus offer a confusing look at reality without understanding the context provided in previous verses. Jesus returned from a trip and was in Capernaum. A number of people including Pharisees and teachers gathered to listen to his teachings. A paralyzed man was lowered through the roof. Jesus said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." After the Pharisees questioned his authority to forgive sins, Jesus told the paralyzed man "...stand up and take your bed and go to your home." Immediately the man stood up took his bed and went home glorifying God. The Pharisees questioned how a rabbi from Nazareth could be a channel of God's forgiveness.

Jesus went on to a great banquet given by Levi. Again the Pharisees were complaining about Jesus' behavior, "Why do you eat and drink with sinners and tax collectors?" Jesus responded, "I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners to repentance." Again the Pharisees questioned how this rabbi could offer repentance.

These two examples stretched the minds of the Pharisees until they burst like new wine skins under pressure from fermentation. It challenged their understanding of Scripture and suggested that what they had learned about God in the past was not the whole picture. In order to get a clearer picture, their thinking would have to change.

Yes, the "C" word, "change". This is a word that sometimes sends leaders and worshippers walking out of a gathering shaking their head. Yet a willingness to grow and change is an important part of the journey of a Christian steward. In their book *The Predicament of the Prosperous*, Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen conclude "... ours is a time in which change in perception is critical to any kind of human future." What is a perception change? "It is change in how the world is viewed, or portions of it."

How many changes have you seen in your life? Is change likely to stop? Probably not. The question is, "Can the human mind today, unlike that of the Pharisees, adapt to new circumstances and perspectives that allow us to live faithfully in a changing world?" Take a moment and reflect. What changes have occurred in the church over the last twenty years? Do you remember the change from the Service Book and Hymnal (Red) to the Lutheran Book of Worship (Green)? Did people in the pew change easily? Not in many congregations. It took years. Now look at the change occurring with Evangelical Lutheran Worship (Cranberry). There were more than 600,000 copies of the book purchased within the first year – more than twice the number the publisher expected. Were worshipper demanding change or simply open to change?

What changes does the world face today? In his thesis *A Battle for Theology*, George Lindbeck writes "only a few periods in the last two thousand years of Christian history when changes comparable in magnitude to the present ones have been in process." Some specific turning points include the "transition from Judaism to Hellenism in the first few centuries, the shift on the part of the church from persecuted minority to imperial majority with Constantine, and the Reformation cataclysm."

The world of the 21st century is more complex and unpredictable than many expected. Change occurs in many ways – modern to post-modern; small to large to small; global to local to global. It is more difficult to predict or understand the implications of change. And yet this is exactly where Jesus stepped in and invited people to believe. Your mistakes can be forgiven and your hope is always present. As disciples of Jesus Christ, our journey will involve growth and change as God leads us. At times this may mean wrestling with God or a radical change in the way reality is perceived. It may mean a change in lifestyle, worship style or shape of the church. But to engage in such a journey is to be a faithful steward of God!

Let us Pray: Dear Lord, Creator, Provider and Protector, grant us the understanding to see the world as it really is, your sacred creation and gift. Forgive us for how we mistreat others and your creation. Give us your Spirit that we might hear your will and make it true. In times of uncertainty, give us a strong faith and the hope of your promises that we may repent and change as you desire. We ask this as disciples of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Amen.

KAM 6/2/09/.