

This morning, we will begin the next phase of our A Lifetime of Stewardship emphasis focusing on Living God's Mission. Over the next few weeks, we will speak to the celebration of what we do with what God has given us, the understanding of what our gifts and time mean relating to stewardship, and the relationship we share with each other here at Bethlehem and in other parts of our lives.

As evidenced throughout the past year with Following Your Heart: A Lifetime of Stewardship, we have made a concerted effort to introduce a new building block on a monthly basis to keep the promise of keeping stewardship front and center in our walk of faith. I pray that this new approach has been positive and enlightening for you personally, as well as for the entire Bethlehem family. We will continue to add new building blocks to the evolving foundation of our stewardship story, as well as living stories of how some of your stewardship efforts have changed lives.

We must have faith that God will always provide what we need and faith that we can live a disciple's life as he calls us. It is understood that we need financial resources to be able to keep Bethlehem strong and viable to continue our mission work. We must also remember that we are not to be consumed by money and worry that we will not have enough. We will begin the annual budget process very soon and that is often a time of discernment and worry, but we must always remember that God is with us in the process and will continue to provide the answers if we are asking and listening. Many Christians are walking around without power because they neglect the practice of thanksgiving. They are complainers and worriers, and by their complaining and worrying, they place water on the Spirit's fire, affecting both themselves and whatever community they are a part of. It is good to remember that we are commanded to "Do all things without complaining and arguing" (Philippians 2: 14) and to not be anxious about anything (Philippians 4:6). When we choose to complain or be anxious, we put out the Spirit's fire. On the contrary, I think by celebrating all the amazing work we do, we can be energized to continue that work. Stewardship is not worrying, but rather, trusting in Christ.

Stewardship is the giving of ourselves and our resources with joy and gratitude for what we have been given. Stewardship is not something that results from a forced obligation or a bad attitude. Giving should always be cheerful. If it is not, then we are not really giving. There are myriad reasons why people choose not to live a lifetime of stewardship. We all encounter obstacles that hinder our service and financial giving and here are a few examples:

#### Obstacles to Stewardship as a Way of Life

- Fear that if we share our time, we won't have enough to do what we want to do.
- Fear that if we give our money away, we won't have enough to buy what we want for our loved ones and ourselves.
- Fear that if we offer our talents, they won't be good enough to meet our expectations.
- Fear that if we love without strings, we won't receive enough love in return.

Stewardship is a priority. We need to take what we have and put it to the right use. Our God-given gifts are needed to practice Christian stewardship. Stewardship is the comfort of knowing that everything comes from God. He gives us our clarity and the vision and character of what to be and do. We can trust Him and not our materialistic goods. Stewardship is recognizing that we belong to Him as a human being and His grace, that the church is not the building, but the body that gathers for worship and leaves for ministry. Those who just dwell in a building end up doing nothing there. Stewardship is not just focusing on our self-interests, but on His interests and on the interests of others. Stewardship is the attitude of gratitude, being thankful in all things,

even when we do not feel gratitude or see it. Stewardship is about being in community, working together and complementing one another's gifts and abilities, and with what we can offer. It is the way we use the gifts He has given us in order to benefit the people in our church and those around us.

As I said earlier, another area of focus is about our relationships and how they relate to stewardship. Stewardship honors God with all the relationships and resources in our life. Christian believers are to practice love and hospitality, ready to offer service for one another as good stewards of God's grace. We demonstrate our love by how we interact and treat one another. I have always thought that Bethlehem members are the most loving, giving, caring people I have ever had the blessing of being associated with. It really is a family. When there is someone in need you respond with cards, phone calls, meals and most importantly...prayers. When there is a financial need of the church, you have answered the bell every single time and your hearts assure us that will continue. Your naturally giving nature is not something that is, or ever will, be taken for granted.

So, where do we go from here?

Bethlehem and every other organized church is going through a great many changes regarding attendance and the ever present financial concerns that go with a shrinking church. The world is different, peoples priorities are different and we all have to find a way in our own lives and minds to survive and know that we are children of God. Liisa will tell you that I am not good with change and that is true. However, I am learning that change will come whether I like it or not, not to mention that in many cases, we have no real control over it. That is where I need to trust God more and maybe you do to. We don't know where we are headed in our lives, but He does and we have to listen.

Pastor Matt made a profound statement at the Council meeting on Thursday night with regards to our changing dynamics here at Bethlehem. He said that we need to accept the new reality and know that God is up to something here at Bethlehem. It doesn't mean that we forget and discount where we have been, but things change in our own lives and things will continue to change for Bethlehem. This amazing place just celebrated it's 95<sup>th</sup> Anniversary and that is truly something to celebrate.

Let us embrace what we are and what we can become as we continue to pursue a Lifetime of Stewardship.