

Moment for Mission – Relationships – 11/3/19 - Jim Whitman

As we present the third segment in our stewardship message of Living God's Mission: A Lifetime of Stewardship, we will consider the relationships we have with God, each other and money.

When you think of your faith, what comes to your mind? A set of rules, regulations and obligations, or is it a deep, intimate relationship with God? We know there are certain guidelines God wants us to follow, but His purpose in giving them is to protect us from sin. When we have a real relationship with God, he stirs up a passion inside us to love people. This kind of relationship allows us to do the things He calls us to do—it just happens naturally. Our worth and value are found in who we are in Christ, not in what we do. Ephesians 2:8-9 says: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast".

We don't necessarily have a relationship with God just because we believe. We know we are expected to have a relationship with God, but do we really, actively work at it? The amazing thing is that He is always there waiting for us to reach out. He isn't going to throw Himself at us, but He will be there every time we ever call on Him. If you are like me, you will try to work things out on your own and hope for the best. Instead of that, we all should remember that God is only a prayer away from easing our mind and soul. It sounds so simple, but how many times have we forgone that prayer instead with worry? I must say that in my personal and business life, I do worry and try to do too much on my own without always reaching out to God. But, when it comes to the work of Bethlehem and our future, I experience a calm and knowledge that He will always be there for us and as I have said before, we must listen to what He is asking of us. Our own personal walk in relationship with God is a never-ending journey I guess, as it will be with Bethlehem.

The relationship that God wants to have with us is rooted in love. John 3:16 is the perfect example of God's perfect love for us.

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life". No other verse in the Bible summarizes God's relationship with humanity and his ultimate love for us.

Just as God wants us to have a relationship with Him, it is also His wish that we have relationship with each other here at Bethlehem and elsewhere in our lives. If you ask yourself what matters in your life, I am sure that next to God, the most important thing would be family and friends. A life without these relationships would be difficult to imagine. But the thought of these relationships in our life brings joy and fulfillment. We all have friends and relationships outside of Bethlehem, but my guess is that we all spend more time with each other, whether inside the church working in our chosen areas of service, or socially outside of the church. With rare exceptions, I am sure that we all have best friends here at Bethlehem that have developed out of our membership here. It isn't by chance, but by God's plan for our life. We may think that we all chose Bethlehem, but I think that Bethlehem chose each of us because of the welcoming family environment and desire to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. I cannot imagine going through a major life moment without knowing that this church family of Bethlehem is within reach. We lift each other up in times of need and Bethlehem is stronger for those relationships. I often wonder how people in difficult situations deal with life without having the relationship resources that we all are blessed with here. We can't take each other for granted and think that we will always be together because life happens. It is the same with our spouses and children. Every moment is a gift that we have been given. I told you a couple of weeks ago that I don't like change. I am still in the limited accepting mode of realizing that Grace and Hunter are adults and that they don't need Liisa and I for everything that goes on in their lives. The telephone calls out of the blue from our children are precious reminders that somehow we have cultivated the right relationship with them. I also think that this church family has an enduring effect on the youth that have passed through this place. I wonder if we realize how important the support of this church family is to the life of those around us. It is a blessing that should not be marginalized.

The last thing I want to share with you is our relationship with money and how it relates to stewardship. There is a lot that goes on at Bethlehem and there will always be surprises along the way as it relates to money. The Lifetime of Stewardship emphasis we began last year and will continue this coming year has provided a different way of thinking about stewardship. It is about introducing other aspects of our life that go beyond the normal time, talents and financial gifts that have been the recurring components for many years. It is about looking at stewardship in an expanded way that incorporates what we do every day of our life and how we interact with people. Being reminded of the building blocks of stewardship, thinking about how we use our individual and collective gifts, realizing how important our relationships are with each other here and elsewhere, and how we choose to financially support the ministry here at Bethlehem is all part of what makes this place what it is... a haven of faith and love that always finds a way to financially support everything that we need. Your continued faith, love, and financial stewardship of Bethlehem will see us through the new reality that Pastor Matt talks about. We should accept the changes and the challenges that come with it and know that God is up to something here at Bethlehem. Stewardship is the giving of ourselves and our resources with joy and gratitude for what we have been given. There are over 2000 references to money in the Bible and I would guess that if you asked 2000 people what their thoughts and feelings about money and the church are, you would get 2000 different perspectives. We can always agree to disagree on this sensitive issue, but in the end, we can all agree that we need to support Bethlehem with our financial promises. We should do it joyfully for what we have been given and not out of an obligation that it is what we are supposed to do. After all, it isn't really ours in the first place. Whatever talents we have been given to be successful in our life, we should be thankful and want to give back to the source where the talent came from.

If God owns everything and graciously gives us what we need, we should live lives of faith that believe in and depend on His care. We should believe his promises and instruction and focus on the mission.