

Sermon: Year A, Proper 3  
Texts: Isaiah 49:8-16a  
I Corinthians 4:1-5  
Matthew 6:24-34

Sometimes one's past has a way of catching up with one. As I was preparing for this morning, I was well aware that today is the first Sunday this year in Ordinary time, following after Trinity Sunday. It wasn't until this morning that I realized, as well, that this is also Memorial Day weekend. I grew up in a Dutch household, and, for us, holidays meant only one thing: time set apart for cleaning. It didn't matter what holiday it was, what month of the year, or what remembrance was being encouraged. Time given meant time that could be well spent putting things in order: cleaning garages, cupboards, basements, closets. The brooms came out, and regardless of parades and picnics and any other prescribed, traditional gatherings, we swept away the clutter that had accumulated over the previous weeks and months.

As I reviewed what I had put down to say this morning, it suddenly looked more like a Dutch holiday presentation rather than a sermon for the new season. It's a bit of housecleaning, theologically speaking. I can only hope, however, that for the morning you can catch a sense of the delight of being Dutch and will feel edified by the task and its shining end result.

In the prayers that we will offer to God in a few minutes, we will include a petition, prescribed by the Prayer Book, about our stewardship. We will collectively pray that out of reverence for God's creation, "we may use its resources rightly in the service of others."

This is a uniquely modern sentiment, a petition that wasn't included within the prayers in the 1549 Prayer Book composed by Thomas Cranmer. When he first wrote prayers for the church and for the world, the sciences hadn't yet come to full flower, in their own way shrinking our perceptions as they expanded our understanding. But this request is well suited for us in the developed West. For it is built on the sturdy presupposition that our primary role in the world is to keep good order and make fair distributions of our material wealth. It's an idea that fits our even broader assumption that, in fact, we live within a closed system, this increasingly small village called our globe, and because we must all co-exist within its defined physical limits, with finite resources, stewardship has come to consist primarily of our careful management of what we have. There is only so much to go around, and, therefore, much is asked from those to whom much has been given.

The key term in our petition is the word "use." We admit that our responsibility is to use rightly and properly. We have the power in our hands now to either build up or to break down. As never before, we are able to rein in our world, re-forming it to our own desires. We are skilled in analyzing it, explaining it, manipulating it, and changing it. Every day, every day, we gather more of it under our own control. And thus stewardship expresses our felt obligation, our moral charge, to answer for what we do and to do what benefits all rather than just some. This is a deeply important recognition.

But it misconstrues what stewardship is at the very heart of our faith. Here I must draw some distance from even our own Prayer Book, choosing to give primacy, instead, to Paul and to his

words from the Epistle we heard this morning. For Paul insists, as is his manner, with intensity and passion, that we are not first stewards of our world or of our environment or of our resources or of anything that we can put in order or manage effectively. We are rather, he said, stewards of the mysteries of God. If we take these words seriously, if we know to what they refer, then it becomes clear that the least of our stewardship applies to fair distribution or right use. It doesn't point us toward what we can measure and allot and draw into balance.

Quite to the contrary, we are asked as stewards to be witnesses – witnesses to God's presence within creation, to the legitimacy of the eternal within the temporal and to a divine freedom that defies our resigned sense of closure within the world. There are mysteries that endure, that don't remit to our dispelling of them, reducing everything to natural determinacy. And especially now, especially within our very material world, fraught with the violence of collecting assets and hoarding resources, what is needed from the church is not our own idiosyncratic version of how issues should be managed. What is needed is simply our radiant witness to the openness that, with profound mystery, surprises and exalts, that evokes exuberance and, mirroring what is seen of God in the world, generates a new, unexplainable generosity of spirit, of embrace, and of the offering and sacrifice of love.

Stewardship isn't responsibility; it's amazement. Imagine, for a moment, how our life would be different if we were to resolutely own this difference, if what others saw when they saw us was first our capacity to be amazed, to rejoice, and to exhibit in ways small and great the surplus of faith and hope and love, stemming from the mystery of God.

By the mystery of God, we are able to remember the past, not with wistfulness or mere nostalgia or in the melancholy of things once held and now lost. We are free, instead, to remember with joyful expectation, because what was, will be in the kingdom that is coming.

By the mystery of God, within our own present time, we need not be constrained by divisions of good and evil, of right and wrong, of friend and foe. We are commanded to love even our enemies. We are instructed to forgive without needing recompense first. We are invited to embody, already, the reconciliation that God has established in Jesus Christ.

By the mystery of God we can look to a future that never falls to despair and never flags in hope, because time will not eventually, at long last, simply falter into nothing. It will come to end and fruition at once, in fullness, as the culmination of all that ever was.

Stewardship begins wherever our amazement with God's grace transforms our life, our composure, our public bearing, and, consequently, our actions, our interactions, and our witness.

Yesterday afternoon I visited a parishioner who, at ninety-eight years, is fairly confined to the small world of her home. She was quite able to describe just how limited her own physical capacities were. Yet, nonetheless, she was as vibrant as anyone could be, for she left no doubt that she saw the grace of God all about her, in the waters of the lake outside her window, in the small children laughing and running up and down the dock, in the care she received from the aides who rotated in and out, in the visit she could share with me, loving the world intensely because, wherever she turned, she could see the mysteries of God. I was amazed. I wasn't

surprised, but I was amazed. And I was so very grateful. I came in order to do something good – right, that’s what ministers are supposed to do. She received me as gift and offered herself as witness to God’s gift all around her. In the manner of the Gospel we heard, she had learned how not to be anxious, but to live consciously within the providence, the mysterious providing of God.

At the best of times, we lose track of time. We don’t count the minutes or hours because time has become, strangely, irrelevant: we are receiving more than we can measure. So it was with her. And perhaps, if we are courageous enough, toward God, so it can be with us, to the delight of the world – not just to quell its agitations but to elicit the vast beauty of overwhelming amazement.

Think of yourself, then, in this way, “as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.”

The Rev. Peter Vanderveen