

Sermon: 15th Sunday in Pentecost  
September 9, 2007  
Luke 14: 25-33

“I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.” We will confess these words together later in this service, in the Apostles Creed. What do they mean? Luther explains: I believe that God created me, along with all creatures. God gave me body and soul; eyes, ears and all the other parts of my body; my mind and all my senses; and God preserves them as well. God gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and land, family, fields, and animals. God gives me all I own. Every day God abundantly provides everything I need to nourish this body and life. God protects me against all danger, shields and defends me from all evil. For all of this, I must thank God, praise God, serve God and obey God.

Sometimes we confess our beliefs using the words of the Nicene Creed: “I believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things, visible and invisible.” In the Nicene Creed God’s making of all things is stated explicitly: God made all things. We could say God built everything... creator, maker, builder. God is the origin of all. And we are to respond to God for God’s creating, or making... or building.

Jesus poses a situation for us to consider: “Who of you wishing to build a tower, does not first sit down, calculating that he has the total money for completion? Otherwise, laying his foundation and not being able to finish, all the spectators would begin to mock him saying that this person began to build and was not able to finish.”

God the builder? Would God build all of creation, setting all of life in motion, without first being sure everything needed for the building project was

available? “No”, we answer, week after week, reciting one creed or the other. God *has* created, and as we see by looking around us, God *continues* to create.

I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of all that is, seen and unseen. This often recited declaration is more than an end. To repeat Luther’s explanation: Every day God abundantly provides everything I need to nourish this body and life. For all of this, I must thank God, praise God, serve God and obey God. This phrase: thank, praise, serve and obey God, is a succinct statement of the expectations of our lives as baptized believers, our lives as stewards of God’s creation. Stewardship, the thing I am here to talk about today, is the way we live out our lives as God’s creatures, and also as beneficiaries of God’s creating the richness of our humanity, our time, our talent and our treasure.

When Jesus asks, “What builder does not first sit down, calculating that he has the total needed for completion?”, we wonder what *is* needed for the completion of God’s building? And, with a little nervous laughter, we wonder who is going to do the work. Jesus points out that if the building project is incomplete the builder will be mocked, “Laying his foundation and not being able to finish,” Jesus says, “all the spectators should begin to mock the builder saying that this person began to build and was not able to finish.” Would God be mocked? With more nervous laughter we wonder who is going to do the work.

During our worship and as part of every baptism and every confirmation we answer this question: *we* are going to do the work. The newly baptized Christian is presented to us and we acclaim, “*We welcome you into the Lord's family. We receive you as a fellow member of the body of Christ, a child of the same heavenly Father, and a worker with us in the Kingdom of God.*” Yes, we are the workers who will complete God’s building project. Everyone of us, each of us, you and I

are the workers who will finish God's building project.

By preaching a group of sermons about various aspects of our roles as stewards, I hope to renew your thinking about yourself as God's worker and as the church's worker and to challenge you to clarify your part in the building of God's project. **Do you ever wonder what your job is in God's creative plan?** Well, you aren't the first. The Shepherd of Hermas wondered about your job in God's creative plan. The Shepherd of Hermas is thought to be the brother of a pope. His writings were widely considered by the church fathers. Writing about God's tower around 150, the Shepherd of Hermas described God's building and the way various people served as workers.

Jesus talks about a builder making a tower and the Shepherd of Hermas says the tower symbolizes God's church and that God's tower is built of stones. People like us, baptized believers and church members, are round stones who have to be *cut, shaped and polished* before we can become sturdy, seamlessly fitting blocks, the building components we are intended to be: the thankful, praising, serving and obedient building materials necessary for God to complete the church and complete the creation. That shaping and polishing comes about through our work as stewards. Once again quoting the liturgy: *We have been welcomed into the Lord's family. We are members of the body of Christ, children of the same heavenly Father, and workers in the Kingdom of God.*

Hold onto that thought while we look at more of Jesus' words from today's gospel reading: "If an individual comes to me without disfavoring his own father and mother and spouse and child and brothers and sisters, both these and continuing beyond these: disfavoring his own self, he is not able to be my apprentice. Therefore, in this way, every person of you who does not say goodbye

to everything to make a beginning himself, that person is not able to be my apprentice.”

These are hard words to hear and I have retranslated them in the hope that you might work at understanding them rather than turning away. Step back with me momentarily and look at this message from an historical point of view. These words, asking for loyalty to Jesus over blood relations do not originate with Jesus. The idea that a person should swear an oath favoring a powerful public figure over blood relations appears in writing as early as 750 BCE, and Jesus’ contemporary, Roman Emperor Gaius Caligula, had a similar oath administered to the Lusitanians after he conquered them in 37 CE, just a few years after Jesus’ crucifixion. The expression is an ancient way to confirm a person’s loyalty to the ruler. In today’s reading Jesus is using a common expression of his time to make the point that he expects his followers to be loyal.

Now, looking back at the bible, recall God’s request that Abraham prove his solidarity with God by killing his son Isaac. God required proof of Abraham’s devotion by having Abraham set up the sacrifice of his son, but God did not require the *killing* of Abraham’s son, only proof of loyalty, again, this was common in the ancient world. More importantly remember, *God* has sacrificed a son to prove that *God* is loyal to *us*. You might say that the sacrifice of Jesus, God disfavoring his own son, is foundational to building God’s tower, that is God’s church. In this reading, Jesus is both predicting God’s tower and setting the priority for our work in building the church, our stewardship.

This idea about choosing God over our family, is serious, however, you can love God more than your family without turning on your family, and significantly, we know that God has sacrificed a son for our benefit. This verse is

not saying that God requires us to always disfavor or hate our families, rather God requires us to be loyal to God first. The real consequential meaning, is exacting and hard to carry out. You are to be more loyal to God than everybody else and everything else. In other words, regardless of how much you love your family members (think of them each) God expects you to love God more, and to demonstrate that love. God is the most important element in your life. God is more important than everything and everyone.

Now, combine that with the point where we stopped a minute ago: God wants you to help build the church by thanking, praising, serving and obeying God... with your whole life. **That is stewardship: the acting out of your love for God.** God expects you to put your stewardship before all else. Hate your father and mother, wife, child, best friend, partner, job, car, house: everything. God is more important.

The idea of putting God first is probably not new to you. I know I think about it several times every day, both because of my desire to do what God wants me to do, and because I have been working as a co-chairperson for the Stewardship committee here at St. Paul's. The other co-chair is Brian Keim. Brian, would you stand up. Brian is also the vice president of our church council. We are both long time members of the congregation.

Until recently, a significant span of time had passed since our congregation had a working stewardship committee and this lack of attention to time and talents may have contributed to a contraction we see in some parts of our ministry. Additionally, while we have done a lot of successful fund raising for special projects in the last decade, we have not worked much on financial stewardship: too few members are giving money on a regular, reoccurring basis, every pay

period for instance. Stewardship dollars keep the lights on, pay the organist's and pastor's salaries and repair the roof. Right now money left to the church by deceased congregational members is being used to pay our water bill and buy paper for the bulletins. **However, we must sustain ourselves.** In terms of building God's tower, currently, we aren't the best cut, most nicely shaped stones.

One of the first things Brian and I did together was to read the stewardship section of our congregational constitution. That gave us direction, but also convinced us that this year we needed to put together a streamlined program, and then next year work to put in place a comprehensive program as spelled out in our constitution. You can read the entire constitution on the church web site by selecting "Members Information" and then choosing the constitution. Or, contact the church office to get a print copy. The paragraph about Stewardship and Benevolence is near the end of the constitution. This fiscal year the stewardship committee will:

1. Promote the expression of Christian faith in daily living
2. Teach what it means to be caretakers of all of God's gifts
3. Lead by example
4. Inform the congregation of local and worldwide ministries
5. Lead members to proportionate giving and
6. Facilitate an every member visitation.

You can expect a sustained message about stewardship as the year progresses.

Brian suggested the theme of Relationship and Participation and I believe it is apt for us as a congregation that has just passed the end of a very long pastorate. We need to find out who we are as a congregation now. What are our

relationships, certainly to each other, but how do we as individuals and families relate to the rest of the congregation? We individuals also need to identify what our participation in this congregation is going to be and, further, how we will be active in the universal church. We need for more members to be more active. St. Paul's members are a talented group, and as a group can do much more than we currently are to build God's church.

The every member visitation will give individuals a chance to talk through these things with other members. The stewardship visitors will come prepared to talk about congregational life and participation in our ministries. They will also have a pledge card on which you can record your name and financial pledge for the year. You will be asked to seal the card in an envelope yourself. Only Brian will see this card after you fill it out. Because of our current difficult financial position, Brian and I would love for you to pledge *today*. If you wish to pledge before a visitor calls you, take a pledge card on your way out of the sanctuary this morning.

Today we have begun wearing name tags. I hope you see this as a friendly gesture to help us know each other better. On a very basic level, wearing name tags will help us with the relationship side of being members of God's church. Using a person's name makes a difference. People feel more included and significant when someone else uses his or her name. People also feel more confident when they can use other people's names. That simple thing increases a feeling of relatedness. I hope you will begin naming those people around you as you greet and converse.

I will give a sermon series on stewardship themes. I hope you will be here and respond to their messages. Brian and I would like to hear from you if you have comments about the stewardship sermons or other parts of the program. That

is what your stewardship committee is doing.

And now I will ask *you* to do a few things during September. I want you to assess yourself in terms of your time, your talent and your treasure. By “treasure” I mean you material wealth. Over and over you have acclaimed God’s creation of all that exists and you believe that God has given you all that you have: God has given you your time, your talent and your treasure. The first step in knowing what you have to offer back to God as your part in building God’s tower, God’s church, God’s creation, is to figure out what your tools are.

1) Evaluate your time. Look at your schedule and see what it reveals How are you using your time? How much of your time goes toward the things that matter the most? Can you see how important God is to you, by working through your schedule?

2) Make a list of your talents. Do you get chances to use them? Do you have opportunities to develop new ones? When you identify the talents God has given you, are you able to see the ways you use them to help build God’s tower?

3) Calculate your net worth. This is the simplest of the three. You add up the value of your assets and subtract any debt. We will have net worth calculation sheets to pass out at the door for people who want help. After you have completed the calculation look for the way you demonstrate God’s importance in your life using your treasure - your material wealth.

Pray about the results of your evaluations. And remember, God often speaks to us through other people, so discuss the results with a friend or your family.

Within our congregation are a wide variety of personal situations. Everyone who works on this evaluation will come up with different results. We have members who are very involved and will look at their results and make no change.

On the other hand, it's likely that lots of members will see surprising results and begin to shift some things around. I hope many members increase their involvement. As I said earlier, as a group we are very talented, and in that way, a very wealthy group of believers, but we can become better cut, and polished stones in God's tower.

Some people may work on this evaluation, see the results and feel bad. If you feel bad, depending on what prompts those feelings, you may want to contact Pastor Greenwald or Brian or me. I am concerned that some people might do a net worth calculation and find a very difficult result, particularly in the wake of the lending problems in the news today. If you discover a financial disaster and realize that you have an urgent need for help, remember that the council has funds set aside to help with urgent personal need. To access these funds contact the pastor or the council president, Candace Centano, or the vice president, Brian Keim. This month, take the time to evaluate your time, talent and treasure.

Many people gathered around Jesus, and he said to them: If an individual comes to me without disfavoring his own father and mother and wife and child and brothers and sisters, both these and continuing beyond these: his own self, he is not able to be my apprentice. Therefore, in this way, *every person of you* who does not say goodbye to everything to make a beginning himself, he is not able to be my apprentice. The Gospel of the Lord.