

Pentecost 13, Proper 15. August 11 2013. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

One of the things that came out of last week's readings for me had to do with how we choose to live our lives. Largely, for most of us, we will or have, at some time or another, asked The Question: "Is my life worthwhile? The quest for meaning in our lives is central to our own sense of well-being, and so inevitably we will, at some time or another fall to asking it.

When a questioner asked that Jesus instruct that man's brother to divide his inheritance with him Jesus immediately recognized that his questioner was defining his own worth by his possessions. So Jesus skipped over the presenting symptom of this man's dis-ease and cut to the chase, to the underlying cause, and to the stark reality that most of us try to ignore: "Possessions are worthless if you hold them up against the certainty of death."

This week our Gospel reading returns to the issues around ownership and provides us with a fundamental tenet of Jesus' message.

It's a message that was brought home to me a few years back when someone gave me what they said was the first draft of the IRS's new 1040EZ Income Tax form. Some of you have heard me mention it before. The fake form contained only two lines, the first a question, the second an instruction. *Line 1: How much did you earn last year? Line 2: Send it all in!*

The humor, of course, is in the seeming rapaciousness of the Internal Revenue Service and its apparent desire to collect more than its "pound of flesh".

But it also reflects our view about who has the right to take away what we think is ours, and paying taxes is a perfect example. We don't like it! Well, most of us don't like it! For those people who have millions or billions, paying income tax is less of a burden, since even 40% of millions leaves you with plenty to live on, but 15% of, say, \$30,000 – a figure that places a family of four well above the defined poverty level – is \$4500, and a huge sum of money. For one it's a necessary evil, for the other perhaps the difference between surviving and living. .

So actually, some "possessions" do matter, but really not for themselves but as means to an end. And that's true for us too, who mostly aren't either end of that spectrum, but somewhere in the middle.

"A means to an end" applies to all of us. The intrinsic worth of something isn't as important for us as Christians; rather, it's what we do with it. That lies at the heart of Christian stewardship: "what you do with all you have all the time". Not "what you own" but "what you have" – a re-defining of possessions away from "ownership" and toward "care on behalf of."

St. Paul was fond of reminding his readers that they owned nothing, not even themselves, a truth that hasn't changed for 20 centuries – it all belongs to God, and God has placed the responsibility for its care and nurture temporarily in each human's hands; in our human hands.

Jesus continually reminds us that what we do with these divine gifts will tell the tale of our

faithfulness to God's own hopes and dreams for a good creation. In last week's gospel Jesus mentioned just this: "One's life does not consist of the abundance of possessions", he said. And today we hear him say "sell your possessions, and give alms." "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and thieves break in and steal. Rather, store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. Rather, store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not consume, and thieves do not break in and steal – for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." **That's Christian stewardship, and from Jesus' perspective it's truly about everything.**

I think, though, that the response most of us have when the language of Christian stewardship and ownership is used is similar to the response we have to the bogus IRS form. It's easy to pay lip service to divine ownership and human stewardship but it's also way too seductive not to see what we care for as what we own.

To that issue of ownership the bible is clear: being a good steward does not mean giving away everything; a tithe is the appropriate amount, the first fruits go to God, and those "first fruits" are 10%.

One way of having our eyes opened to the very human struggle over ownership and possessions is to stop using personal ownership language for a day. Instead of thinking "I'm going to drive my car to the grocery store" say to yourself "I'm going to take God's car to the grocery store". Or think of what is in the bank as "God's bank account" rather than your own – just for a day.

Even for such a short period of time this exercise will raise up for you all sorts of questions and thoughts that, in all likelihood, have never been raised before.

Doing this will help all of us enter into a deeper understanding of what Christian Stewardship is truly about, for if we genuinely believe that everything belongs to God then it will alter what we do with everything we "have", all the time.

Jesus also offers us a further insight into stewardship. Our stewardship must be proactive, not reactive. If we are to care for all that comes our way we are to "be dressed for action", we are to be ready, prepared for what will come. The only way to do this is to have a plan!

It's a little bit like trying to lose weight. The most successful dieters have a plan and they implement it. If you don't sit down and figure out what your body needs in terms of calories, and where you will get those calories from, it will be all too easy to eat that piece of cake, to have that extra serving of meat at lunch, to go back to the buffet line one extra time.

And if you don't sit down and figure out what sort of exercise is going to be required and when you'll do it then you will never get started.

So plan your stewardship intentionally, recognizing that none of what you have is really yours anyway.

And know, too, that God will never ask you to “send it all in” Our God is compassionate and knows our needs before we ask, and will richly bless us if we are but faithful to the call to pray, to serve, and to give for the Kingdom. Amen.