

Well, it's Labor Day Weekend. The last holiday of what has been a dazzling summer here on Whidbey Island. Our rector is taking a rest from at least his preaching labors today.

As a result, you're stuck with me. A retired dude with nothing better to do on a Labor Day Weekend. And besides I can't go anywhere because the ferry line is backed up.

There is, however, some method in this madness. September begins tomorrow. And many of you know what that means. Stewardship season gets underway at St. Augustine's. And yours truly is chair of the annual stewardship campaign.

So that's what I'm going to talk about today – stewardship. Now as I say that, I may notice some of you gaze longingly out the window, check text messages on your cell phones or turn down your hearing aids. But give me a chance. I'm going to share some thoughts on what stewardship means in a modern Christian community.

Yes, stewardship does include making a financial commitment to our parish. We have to pay our bills. We'll ask you to do that during the pledge campaign that kicks off on September 14. And yes, stewardship does include making a time and talent commitment to our various parish ministries. Somebody has to do the work. We'll ask you to do that at the Ministry Fair after worship services next Sunday, September 7.

And a reminder that this year, the Ministry Fair takes the place of the old volunteer check-off that used to come in the pledge card. That just didn't work. So this year's pledge card will ask only for our financial commitment, and the Ministry Fair will ask for our time and talent commitments.

As we begin this 2015 stewardship season, I'd say we are in pretty good shape at St. Augustine's. We don't owe a penny of debt to anybody. We've had a record number of people making financial pledges in both of the past two years. In fact, there were 110 pledgers this year. Our ministries remain diverse and dedicated. More new people continue to join us.

We do face a serious financial challenge because of the loss of the incredibly generous and long-time financial support of our beloved Judy Yeakel, as well as half a dozen others who have left us this year.

We needn't live in anxiety about it. Our parish is blessed to have resources to help us meet this challenge, if we use them wisely. But it does make our stewardship season this year all the more important. The future really is in our own hands.

By stewardship, however, I mean way more than writing a check to the church once a week or volunteering to be part of a ministry. I believe it means this: serving, sharing, tending and protecting what God has given us. Serving, sharing, tending, protecting.

Those are all active verbs. Stewardship is not a passive, somebody-else-does-it endeavor.

Let's dig a little deeper and go all the back to the beginning. Genesis chapter Two. "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." To work it and take care of it. Sounds to me like the Lord God told us what our stewardship responsibility is right from the get-go.

Moving forward a few thousand years to First Chronicles: "For all things come from you, Oh Lord, and of your own have we given." In other words, everything we have comes from God and it's our duty to give it back. Sounds to me like somebody was writing the very first pledge campaign letter.

Traveling on a few centuries to the Gospel of Matthew: "Jesus said, for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Your treasure and your heart. Those are key words. We'll come back to them in a minute.

Finally, there is today's reading from Paul's letter to the Romans. As always with Paul, he's doing a full-throated exhortation about how we're meant to live. This particular reading almost approaches a primal scream. Listen to some of the language he uses: Love one another. Outdo one another. Do not lag in zeal. Be ardent in spirit. Live peaceably. Rejoice. Feed. Persevere. Contribute. Bless. Overcome evil. Live in harmony.

Hear all those active verbs that Paul uses? That's what stewardship sounds like.

And that's why stewardship isn't just about making a pledge or volunteering for a ministry – although please, please do both! It's really a way of life. Living in gratitude for all that God has given us and demonstrating that gratitude in a hundred ways every day of our lives. St. Francis of Assisi said it better than I just did when he told his disciples to preach the Gospel and use words if necessary.

I could spend the rest of this homily spouting stuff about stewardship you've probably already heard. But you get the picture. Instead I'm going to tell you a story about someone very close to my heart.

This is about my great aunt, Bertha Carter. She was born in Washington Territory, before we became a state, in March of 1889. And she died in Tacoma in 1993 at the age of 104. She was my grandmother's sister, the oldest of six siblings.

My Aunt Bertha was what we used to call "a good Christian woman." That's a term that has fallen out of style these days, and what a shame. We really ought to reclaim it. Those simple words carry great positive energy and meaning, and in my humble opinion they are the main reason we come here every week. To become good Christian women and men.

So let's try something. Please turn to the person next to you right now and say to them, "You are a good Christian woman or man" and have them return the favor to you. Try it. See what I mean? Those words can unleash an amazing, positive, grateful energy into the room.

Aunt Bertha didn't have an easy life and she wasn't famous. Nobody wrote a book about her . . . but maybe I will. She was a poor child who was forced to leave school after the fourth grade to work and help support the family.

At the age of 18, she married a man almost twice her age, and they set out to homestead 40 hardscrabble acres on the road to Mount Rainier near Eatonville. Together, they cut down trees and pulled stumps with a horse and harness, built their farm house and a cow barn, and ran a dairy farm for 40 years.

Here's my favorite part of the story. One day in 1915, her husband Curt got sick and couldn't drive his rickety Ford truck to get their milk to the dairy in Tacoma. So Bertha did it. When she got into town, a cop pulled her over and demanded to know what she was doing. He scolded her that women aren't supposed to drive.

She pointed her finger right back at him and said if he didn't get out of her way and let her get to the dairy the milk would go sour and the farm would go broke. Well, she made it to the dairy.

And the very next day Bertha showed up at whatever the Department of Motor Vehicles was back then and got what our family believes was the first driver's license ever issued to a woman in the state of Washington.

When Curt died, Bertha was 60 years old. She had to give up the farm. And in order to support herself as a woman alone she took in and cared for what she called "old ladies" until she was 94. Some of those old ladies were younger than she was.

Bertha understood what living in gratitude means. There was no church out in the country where she lived, so she started one. A one-room, all-denomination Protestant church. When she couldn't persuade a pastor from town to come preach, she or Curt would do it. She took communion to the sick. Taught Sunday school. Brought food to everybody. And read the Bible to people who couldn't see any more.

She never owned any expensive clothes and didn't want any. She always wore simple cotton print dresses, and when they wore out she'd cut them up to make patches for the crazy quilts she sewed.

She had a habit of repeating certain key phrases – words to live by, she called them. "Waste not, want not"...was one. She made a pie out of every apple she ever picked. "The Lord will provide". . .was another. She didn't live in fear; she knew her God would always come through.

And, of course, there was, “Idle hands are the devil’s workshop.” She hurled that one at me when she caught me reading comic books instead of mowing the lawn.

After she left the farm, she would make what she called her “rounds” every Saturday morning to visit “her people.” She drove the same car for 25 years. It was a 1940 Ford V-8 with those “suicide” rear doors that opened backwards. I loved that car. I remember her pulling up to our house, bringing us something she’d grown or baked, always asking the same question: “How are you folks doing today?” We’d fill her in on our lives, and then she’d move on to the next set of “her people.”

She wrote little notes of encouragement on scraps of paper, in her fourth-grade school girl script, and mailed them to those she thought were “down in the dumps.” While I was in the Army in Vietnam, she’d send me chatty letters about the apples in her yard or the birds on her fence. Sometimes she’d enclose some religious pamphlets from Oral Roberts. She’d scribble a note on each one saying something like, “Read this just before bedtime” or “Jesus wants you to know this.”

She gave away most of what little money she had. She’d always say others needed it more than she did.

The last time I saw Aunt Bertha was a few months before she died. She was living in a nursing home. She had become very impatient with God and just couldn't understand why the Lord hadn't taken her yet. She was frustrated that she couldn't drive and make her rounds any more.

As I came to her room, I looked in and saw her standing at the bedside of her roommate, an elderly, bedridden woman with dementia. The woman was moaning and trying to mouth some words. Bertha was standing beside her, holding her hand, trying to calm her and asking if she'd like a drink of water or a bite of peaches. Still taking care of old ladies, I thought to myself.

My Aunt Bertha was a good Christian woman. She lived her life in gratitude for what God had given her and she demonstrated it in a hundred ways every day of her life. Her treasure was where her heart was. She was an active verb.

And so, my friends, my good Christian women and men, that's the challenge I give you as we begin our stewardship season here at St. Augustine's. Live your lives in gratitude for everything you have been given. Demonstrate it in a hundred ways every day of your life. Show that your heart and your treasure are in the same good place.

And guess what. You can get started when you leave this room in a few minutes by signing up for the Stewardship Kick-Off event on Sept. 14. The sign-up sheets are just outside Campbell Hall. Then come to the Ministry Fair next Sunday and find a new ministry to commit yourself to. Then pick up your financial pledge packet at the kick-off on September 14 and spend some time considering how you will support our parish in the year ahead. Then turn in your pledge card at the All-Parish Dinner on October 23.

And most of all: Make yourself an active verb.

And the people said, "Amen."