

Lessons Learned From Pigs and Geese A Lesson in Good Stewardship

*Matthew 25:14-30 1 Peter 4:8-11
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa*

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Two weeks ago was Stewardship Emphasis Sunday. Those of you who were here may remember my attempt to make a philosophical and theological connection between good stewardship and the concept of “spreading the wealth around.” I planned on following that up that last Sunday with another sermon that dealt with good stewardship, but with particular emphasis on the sharing and pledging of our time and talents. But as you know there was a little something in the form of a presidential election that I decided to focus on instead.

Since the assigned lectionary Gospel reading for this Sunday is the familiar Parable of the Talents, I thought it wise to return to this theme of good stewardship. I won't, however, be focusing directly on this particular biblical text. Instead, as this sermon title suggests, I plan to concentrate on what we can learn about stewardship for our friends the pigs and geese.

Let me begin by reiterating that being a **good steward**, from a biblical perspective, is not really about a yearly Stewardship Campaign to meet next year's church budget. Rather, **good stewardship is the ongoing spiritual discipline of giving. That involves the daily offering of ourselves – of all we have and all we are – to God and each other.**

The scriptures also teach us that it takes the **commitment** of each and every one of us in order to function to the best of our ability as a community of faith. Celia Ketcham, our youth elder that is currently serving on the Session, opened our monthly meeting this past Tuesday evening with a very meaningful devotion. In it, she reminded us that each one of us is blessed with different gifts, talents, and abilities, and it takes all of us working together in order to fulfill the mission to which God has called us.

It reminded me of the true story of **the actual origin of the English word, “stewardship.”** And that's where we learn something that deals with pigs.

Pigs were among the first animals to be domesticated by the ancient clans of Scotland. As nomadic people living in a harsh, severe environment, the Scots considered pigs as hearty, useful animals. For instance, pigs would eat most

anything, they provided good meat, and their hides were strong and resilient.

For centuries Scottish clans highly valued their pigs. In fact, an entire economy based on pigs developed. That meant that a clan's wealth and prosperity depended, in part, on the number and health of its pigs. As this economy developed, they discovered that it made more sense for the whole clan to put their pigs together in one place, rather than each individual family having and taking care of their own.

Each clan, therefore, gave all their pigs to the family member that was chosen as the most well-respected and trustworthy – someone they could count on to use what was entrusted to him for the good of the whole community. The place where pigs were gathered together was called, in Old English, a sty. We still use the term “**pig sty**” today.

In fact, I've always been quite familiar with the term after growing up hearing my mom often refer to my bedroom as a pig sty when it needed to be picked up.

The person in the Scottish clan who was chosen to watch after the pigs was called a warden, or simply a ward. **This warden of the pig sty was called the “sty ward.” Over the years, this term, sty ward, was shortened to – you guessed it – “steward”.**

Thus when you hear someone say that Christians should be good stewards, I guess they literally mean that we should be the kind of people that the whole clan can trust with their pigs.

Being a good manager and caretaker of all that is entrusted to us is what Jesus refers to in many of his parables, including the Parable of the Talents. So when the New Testament, which was written in Greek, was translated into English, they decided to use the word that came to mean the same thing: steward.

“Swine theology,” as I like to call it, has all kinds of usefulness. For example, in our Epistle Lesson for today, 1 Peter 4:10 tells us: “As each has received a gift, employ it for one another as good stewards of God's varied grace.”

This passage suggests that **God has given gifts to every one of us. It also suggests that the gifts of each are meant to be used “for one another.”** So like the clan and the sty warden, God calls us to use our gifts for the good of the whole community, and the whole world. This requires, therefore, that we first develop and then share our gifts.

This passage also notes that **God's grace varies from person to person – not in the amount of grace given, but in what each of us has been blessed with. We each have different gifts, and that's good thing. Knowing this should help us avoid the temptation of comparing ourselves with others and their gifts.**

Well that's enough about pigs. What can we learn about good stewardship from geese? A few years back I was emailed a wonderful story called, “Lessons From Geese.” I want to share that with you today in the context of good stewardship. For I think that the lessons we can learn will be very helpful to us as a congregation in the coming year. There are 5 short lessons.

Lessons from Geese – # 1

As each goose flaps its wings, it creates an “uplift” for the bird that follows. By flying in a V formation, the whole flock adds 71% more flying range than if each bird flew alone.

The Lesson:

People who share a common direction and a sense of community can go further, and get where they are going quicker and easier, because they are traveling on the support of one another.

In the context of a congregation, we can accomplish so much more when we all participate together (whether it be in worship, committee work, fellowship events, mission projects, educational opportunities, work days, etc.).

This lesson also emphasizes the need for all of us to contribute to our sense of community. It didn't take me very long when I arrived here in Tulsa in March to observe that the sense of being a “family” and hospitable community is one of the most important elements of being a member or friend of College Hill.

Lessons from Geese – # 2

Whenever a goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of trying to fly alone, so it quickly gets back into formation to take advantage of the “lifting power” of the bird immediately in front.

The Lesson:

If we have as much sense as a goose, we will stay in formation with those who are headed where we want to go.

Now that doesn't mean, of course, that we all have to think or act alike, because we know we don't. We all know the difference between unity and uniformity. That does mean, however, that following a common vision for ministry helps contribute to our sense of unity and calling as a community of faith.

Lessons from Geese – # 3

When the lead goose gets tired it rotates back into formation and another goose flies at the point position.

The Lesson:

It pays to take turns doing the hard tasks and sharing the leadership with others. For as with geese, we are interdependent upon one another.

This becomes even more crucial in smaller congregations. We know people get tired, and it's only right and necessary to take a break. However, if people don't step back up to the plate and relieve those who are in leadership positions, then burnout can become a very real possibility.

Therefore, we need YOUR hard work in the coming year! And that may require a bit more of a sacrifice on all of our part as we continue to make the

mission and ministry of College Hill a priority in our lives.

Lessons from Geese – # 4

The geese in formation honk from behind to encourage those up front to keep up their speed.

The Lesson:

When we “honk” at others, we need to make sure our honking provides encouragement, not something that is less than helpful.

While it's true that constructive criticism is both helpful and necessary, we may need to remind ourselves from time to time that it's very different from just basic complaining and negativity because things aren't done the way we want them done.

So let us strive to be encouragers, not criticizers, of one another.

Lessons from Geese – # 5

When a goose gets sick or wounded or shot down, two geese drop out of formation and follow it down to help and protect it. They stay with the goose until it is either able to fly again or dies. Then they launch out on their own, join another formation, or catch up with the flock.

The Lesson:

Again, if we have as much sense as geese, we'll stand by each other.

In any congregation, not everyone is up all the time. Each and every one of us goes through emotional, physical, and spiritual cycles. Sometimes we're up and sometimes we're down. When we recognize that someone is down, those of us who are up need to provide support.

This is important, because sooner or later those who are up will be down and will then be the ones in need of the support of others.

So as we continue to reflect upon what good stewardship means in our own lives, and in the life of this congregation, let us remember to focus on our own contribution to the ministry to which God has called us. And remember the wisdom in the old saying, “Birds of a feather flock together.”

Amen.