

Corinthians 4:1-7

Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God. I have applied all this to Apollos and myself for your benefit, brothers and sisters, so that you may learn through us the meaning of the saying, "Nothing beyond what is written," so that none of you will be puffed up in favor of one against another. For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?

“Stewards of God’s Mysteries”

“Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.” (Vs. 1-2)

Barbara Brown Taylor, a professor of preaching and a minister in Georgia, is one of my favorite modern preachers. In her book *The Preaching Life* Taylor relayed a story to her readers of an encounter she had with a beloved pastor when she was a girl. A young pastor came to Taylor’s small Midwest town. Taylor’s parents were fond of having him out to dinner. One night before the meal Taylor asked to show him one of her projects in the back yard. Taylor led the minister to her latest save, some tadpoles that had been stranded in muddy water after a storm. The next Sunday in church, the minister looked right out at Taylor and spoke of God’s care of creation as being similar to a young girl’s desire to save stranded tadpoles and nurture them as they grew into frogs so that they may live life to its fullest.

The minister’s interest in Taylor’s activities and his ensuing exhortation in Sunday’s worship made a large impact on her belief that her stewardship in this world mattered and that God had a purpose for her. She began to understand that God called her to care for the least of these, no matter the odds. Taylor knew that she was part of God’s work in the world and began discovering her place in the church—a journey she would say is still going on today.¹

You do not have to be old or wealthy to be a steward of God’s mysteries. The call is common to each one of us regardless off age or income level. We all have gifts and talents to be used to partner with God.

To talk about stewardship as church folk, we have to go back to the roots of what we know about God. Back to what is basic about our faith. Stewardship is lacking if we simply take a look at our finances once a year and pledge something. Christian stewardship is about believers knowing that we have been given gifts to fulfill our

callings. How do we, like Taylor, learn to recognize our gifts from God and trust that we can use them to serve without fear?

Paul went back to the basics in our passage to guide the Corinthians. But he wasn't responding to the kick-off of stewardship season in the Corinthian church! Instead Paul writes to squelch the boasting and judging pattern of the church. When Christians are caught up in self righteousness, judging others and boasting about the correctness of our own or our leader's ways, we become bound. We are bound because we've forgotten who the righteous One is, who the Judge is, who the One without flaw is. A people who judge and boast, are bound to their own ideologies. They are not free to serve as a steward of God's mysteries because all the mystery has been stripped away. Into the Corinthians' triumph over their superior Christianity and puffed up favor towards one another and Paul, he proclaims these jolting questions. "For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?" (v. 7)

Yes, it is back to the basics time for the Corinthians, and also for us. Paul knew they could not live by faith if they believed they were creator and judge. Their trust had been placed in their own merits instead of God's grace and they forgot that servants and stewards are not honored apart from Christ. Stewards are accountable to the owner after all, so stewards of God's mysteries must strive to show forth the gospel as a whole. Paul told the Corinthians to let go of judging others that they may be free to be trustworthy stewards pointing to God's mysteries.

Similarly, I know that we today cannot give freely if we do not believe that God is Creator and Judge. Stewardship is bound to our trust in God. Human faithfulness reflects our belief in God's trustworthiness. Our culture calls to us stockpile our funds and acquire all we can. Go into debt to get what we "need" today blares radio, TV and internet ads! And to cries like these the gospel of Jesus Christ creeps subversively in and declares that God has already made all things ours. God freely gives. You do not have to strive for unmerited grace; it is freely given to all and becomes the shared belief of our life together. Calvin said in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* that there is no way we can increase God's possessions. The way we extend generosity toward God is by practicing it toward the saints on earth. Because every thing of eternal importance is already ours in Christ, we can give of ourselves without anxiety. We become with Taylor, stewards of God's mysteries, free to use our gifts for God's purposes. We become free to claim our gifts as God's good gift to us.

"The needs of the world are so great that contemplating them can overwhelm and paralyze us. So God calls us to reflect on our specific circumstances. With regard to stewardship, we can ask ourselves, 'What has God given me that is adequate to address the needs before me?' We ask this question personally and corporately, seeking the particular place and way of giving to which we have been called."² Then we also take note of the gospel which declares that everything we have, we have received. All things are already ours! Faith leads us to ask ourselves hard questions about our lives as stewards. Are we free to respond to God's call? How just is my living? Do I trust God's

providence enough to live my life with a little less worldly security? Hmm. After all stewards receive what they have for the purpose of utilizing it well for the benefit of the Owner.

Our stewardship challenge is to think of ourselves, “as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.” May we be found so! Amen.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (Cowley Publications: Boston, Massachusetts, 1993).
² Citation taken from *A Theology of Stewardship* a pamphlet made by the Theology and Worship Division of the PCUSA. It can be found at www.pcusa.org.