The Stewardship Debacle

Stewardship is a beautiful but all too frequently misappropriated word. Authentic stewardship has to do with wisdom and prudence; how we manage the resources with which we have been blessed. Sadly, in many religious circles it is the word trotted out each year come a congregations' annual fundraising campaign, thereby diminishing stewardship to a mere synonym for fundraising. Stewardship is not about fundraising; it is about the prudent management of the resources with which congregations are blessed. Check out the use of the word steward in sacred texts. Where in the Bible was the steward ever a fundraiser; the steward was a household manager. The Qur'an refers to both Adam and David as khalifa (i.e. divine stewards) and as such administrators of God's bounty. In his ethics, Aristotle associated the virtue of prudence - the wise and responsible use of possessions and gifts given - with stewards who acted as managers of a household.¹

As we head into the season in which many congregations marshal their troops to make their pledges and subscribe to a new budget, beware of the subliminal messages a misread of stewardship may nurture.

- If this is the only time each year you as clergy talk about money do you mean to imply to your congregants that they only need make a connection between God and money once a year?
- If you are a congregation that encourages tithing and this is the only time you talk about it are you suggesting that only ten percent of peoples' possessions belong to God leaving them to do as they wish with the other ninety percent?
- Does your practice of money-talk leave your congregants living in two separate and disconnected worlds; God's world and the church, and my world and my work?

Stewardship becomes an authentic practice in congregations when money-talk is separated from fundraising. Preach and teach about money and the faithful use of possessions throughout the year; hold seminars wherein families can acquire the tools of good financial management. The subjects Jesus talked about the most were money via the faithful use of possessions and the kingdom of God. However, I don't recall that Jesus ever engaged in fundraising.

Then, come budget-making time stop talking about money and embrace good fundraising practices: be upfront and bold in telling your story, and highlight the
differences you are making via your mission in the community and world. Celebrate who you are and invite people to share in your ministry. As Henri Nouwen has observed "fundraising is a way of announcing our vision and inviting other people into our mission."

Insights of Dr. Bill Enright


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More information here.