

## **Following Your Heart – By Jim Whitman**

This morning I would like to begin a journey with you that will be a different path than we have taken before regarding stewardship. So before anyone starts to get nervous and think I am going to talk about money, please relax...I'm not. It will be referenced, but it is not the focus of this new path. Stewardship has had a special place in my heart for a long time. I feel that I have always looked at it differently than most people, although I may be wrong. I understand that most congregations think about stewardship in only one way: that it will be done for three weeks in the fall, and that it will be about money. I don't feel that way and never have. Today I would like to lay out the path that I pray we will travel together. It is critically important for you to understand that this message is not about me telling you how you should think about stewardship. I will preface my message in saying that I have many faults and I do not want hypocrisy to become a new one. What I hope to do is to open our minds to a new way of life in that we think about stewardship every day, every week, every month and not just for three weeks in the fall. This can be a new path of reflecting on the incredible generosity of God to Bethlehem and to each of us. In turn, the hope is that we will Follow our Heart and be as generous to each other and Bethlehem as He has been to us.

In the letter you received last week, we talked about being reminded every day about the blessings and grace that God has given us. Even though we all have days that feel like the weight of the world is upon us, we have so much to be grateful for:

Life, health, gifts, talents, our families, friends, and Bethlehem.

We know that as stewards, we have been entrusted with so much from God. None of us really deserve all that He has given us, but He has done it regardless of that fact. When everything seems to be going our way, it is easy to think about how smart or hard working we are and look at all we have accomplished. In reality though, we are not at the heart of all of those things...God is.

We will be speaking about the importance of having a right heart attitude about giving and then living out that heart attitude in practice. We will focus on several building blocks to living a life of stewardship that we hope will change our thinking and keep stewardship at the center of all we do. The building blocks we will speak to begin with:

Humility comes from the realization that we get credit for nothing. If we look back over our lives, we must humbly bow our heads and acknowledge all we have is a gift from God. He has put us in exactly the family and circumstances that He wanted us to have. Our task is to seek and follow His direction and never forget who got us there.

Gratitude is a thankful appreciation for what we receive. We can respond in one of two ways: passively or actively. If we are passive, we will be grateful for the gifts in our lives, but may not act by responding in kind to those less fortunate than we are. If we are active about our gratitude, we will understand that we can and should move that gratitude to action. That can come in the form of volunteering, using our gifts of talent, or helping to support mission and our own church with our financial resources. The key is that any one of those areas are stewardship and incredibly important for us to share.

Time with God is something a steward finds time to do every day. It doesn't matter when, but only that we prioritize it in our daily life. We should go to Him and ask Him what is it that He wants us to do. Hopefully, we all have things that we are passionate about and in our quiet time with God, He will direct

us and lead us there. You may think that what is important to you might not have any value here at Bethlehem, but that is not true. We are many different people who come together as one in this place to worship together and to determine where our mission field lies. Let us spend time with God and listen for the answer.

Trusting in God can only happen when we get to know God better. Spending more time with God will help us to better understand where He is leading each of us and increase the level of trust in Him no matter the circumstance. Trust in God is the basis of our faith because without it, our faith is weak and we will rely on our own instincts. Following our instincts is something we have all done and more often than not, we end up praying that God will help us find our way out of the mess we have created. Our situation may not always be what we want it to be, but trusting in God will help us to accept our circumstances knowing He has our best interests at heart.

Love and compassion is a building block that the world needs much more of. It can be difficult to find the face of Jesus in certain circumstances when we see someone who might be overbearing or self-entitled. These are the times when our Time with God we just spoke to will help us find the strength to act or give when it is most difficult. It is easy for us to find empathy for our family and friends, but to those who are not close to us, it can be more challenging. Opening our hearts to others is something that we may not relate to stewardship, but it is if we choose to live a life of stewardship.

Proportionate giving is typically not a concept that most stewardship emphasis' speak to, but as we have laid out, we are taking a different path to stewardship. The hope is that following our heart will determine what giving level will equate to us doing our best for a loving and generous God. We are all entrusted with different levels of gifts in our life. No two of us are exactly the same and I don't know that God sees it any differently. If we have more and are full of gratitude and humility, our heart will lead us to that level of giving. 2 Corinthians verse 7 says, "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."

Belonging is something that each of us longs for. We want to feel connected and a part of something greater than ourselves. Stewardship should unite us in the Body of Christ, where we truly belong. Bethlehem is where we meet our friends, share our joys and sorrows, give and ask for prayers. We give what we can and we receive what we need. We all have a story of how we came to Bethlehem and what it means to belong to our church family. We will share some of those stories in the coming weeks and months and would ask that you consider being a part of that.

Joy comes when we use our faith well. If we say we have faith, but do not integrate all of the building blocks we have just touched on, we most likely will not find joy. Once we can put it all together we can find the joy in giving, whether it is our time, gifts, or financial resources. All three of these gifts are equally important because one cannot exist without the other two. All the money in the world will be of no use if there are not people to volunteer their time out of joy and do the work. A beautiful voice will fall on deaf ears without the joy of belonging and people here to listen. Bethlehem can only continue to thrive with our financial resources given out of love and gratitude.

I hope that today will lay the foundation for the coming weeks and that you are all excited about what is to come. None of what we do at Bethlehem is possible without each and every one of you. 1 Corinthians 12:27 says, "You are the body of Christ. Each one of you is a part of it."