

Found faithful

A four-Sunday worship series

Introduction

Think of us this way as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. Moreover it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. *1 Corinthians 4:1-2 (NRSV)*

A story is told of King Henry III, who lived in medieval Germany during the 11th century. The king grew tired of his royal duties and so he applied to a monastery to become a monk. The religious superior of the monastery said to Henry, "Your Majesty, do you understand that to join this monastery you must become obedient to me as your religious superior? That will be hard because you have been king."

Henry replied, "I understand. The rest of my life I will be obedient to you, as Christ leads you."

"Then I will tell you what to do," said the leader of the monastery. "Go back to your throne and **serve faithfully** in the place where God has placed you." Which is exactly what King Henry ended up doing. When King Henry III died, this statement was written about him: "The King learned to rule by being obedient."

Like King Henry, we can tire of our responsibilities. Like King Henry, we need to be reminded that God has called us and equipped us to be **faithful in our unique roles** – be it as a plumber, accountant, mother, father, pastor or teacher. God expects us **to be faithful** in our relationships with each other, as well as with our resources.

The story about King Henry III and what he learned about being faithful to his call has implications for each of us today. Jesus taught us that faithfulness starts with the simple and everyday things of life. Over the course of the next four weeks, we will consider how this topic relates to how we function as stewards of all that God gives to us regardless of our age, status or financial means.

If each day's activities were a letter written to God – it should be our goal to sign off each night with the words, "Faithfully yours." Might it be so.



Week 1: Found faithful as God's stewards

Scripture

Think of us this way as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. Moreover it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. *1 Corinthians 4:1-2 (NRSV)*

Sermon starter

Living as disciples of Jesus involves being transformed into Christ's image and being reoriented from that of a consumer to that of a steward (Romans 12:1-2). Being a trustee of God's gifts in our lives doesn't come naturally. It requires intentionality and training. This is a mysterious thing and is part of the call extended by Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:1-2.

Paul uses words in this short text which carry important images from his day.

The word Paul uses for *servant* is especially interesting. It is *huperetes*, which meant a slave who would row on the lower tier of a two-tier galley ship. Some commentators have built on this imagery and said that Jesus is the captain whose hand is at the wheel directing the vessel while we work with the oars that have been given to us to move the vessel forward. We are all invited to participate and "pull our weight" in the shared roles we have in moving the church forward. Each of us has our jobs, and Jesus desires willing and ready workers to do what needs to be done.

The other word image is steward and here Paul uses the Greek word *oikonomos*, which was used in reference to the chief servant in charge of a household. The chief steward would control the staff, ordering supplies, and related details – but remained a servant nonetheless. Above all else, the *oikonomos* needed to be reliable – trustworthy. When the master would leave and tend to other matters, he relied on the *oikonomos* to care for matters until his return home.

So how are we doing while the Master Jesus is away? What would Jesus say upon his return to your congregation after reviewing how we are working to move forward in mission and service? Are we using appropriately all that has been placed in our care?

Christ has placed many resources and responsibilities in our care. Certainly, our money is one of these resources. When we come to the point in the worship service where offerings are received, how we speak about this activity is important. Not everyone gives every time the plate is passed. Are there ways to bring everyone into this expression of gratitude – even when they do not bring a tangible gift?

Some traditions sing the doxology as part of this aspect of the service. Is the doxology a way to fill the time, is it a blessing for the gifts that have been received or is the doxology an offering of praise which goes hand in hand with our monetary offerings?

Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

This offering of praise is a way for all persons – even those who may not have contributed a tangible gift – to participate in this faithful act of gratitude. Who of us is unable to offer up a word of praise?

As servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries, all that we say and do become offerings to God. All of us regardless of our age and status and financial means have something to offer as expressions of gratitude. Being servant stewards begins with simple expressions like a song or a prayer and leads to the offering of our time and our talent and our treasure. None of these gain us any merit in the eyes of God. It's our way to acknowledge with grateful hearts all that God has done and continues to do for us. Thanks be to God!

Children's lesson

This lesson can be offered at the beginning or end of the service. Explain in simple terms the theme of the morning message and how Paul uses images of people rowing a boat and a head servant of a home (a butler) to describe what it means to be a steward.

Ask how they help around the house or in the classroom to show they want to do their part as a member of the family or member of the school. Ask what they are able to offer to God and to the church. Affirm them for all they do to share what they have with others.

Mention that next Sunday, there will be a story told in church about a young boy who helped Jesus to teach adults a very important lesson. Hand out note cards with the following information on it.

My name:

My gift of treasure, time or talent:

Invite them to think during the next week about something they want to bring to church and give as an offering that reflects one of these three areas – treasure, time or talent. Mention that they will be invited forward next Sunday to place their note cards in a basket. If they want to bring something with the note card such as a can of food for a food bank, some money for the offering, a note saying what service they want to provide for another person that week, etc., that would be good as well.

Encourage them to think of ways to serve others and be good stewards of what God has given them as they begin a new week. (In order to connect with the families that weren't in church this Sunday, you may want to send out an email describing what you did and invite the parents to work with their children to come with a note card and/or gift of offering next Sunday. This will be a good reminder for those families who were present as well.)

Week 2: Found faithful in little

Scripture

There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. *John 6:9*

Sermon starter

Jesus held up children to be models of what it takes to enter the Kingdom of God. What would it look like to invite the children of the church to take the initiative to bring their talents and time and treasure before God and the congregation, even as the boy with the bread and fishes did in John 6? What has God placed in the baskets of our children that we can help them identify? We are never too young to consider the call to be stewards of God's gifts.

Children's lesson

You may want to have persons greeting the children as they enter the church with a special welcome and invitation to take a card to use for the following activity if they forgot the cards from last Sunday.

Invite the children to come forward at the beginning of the message for the reading of the John 6 story and to bring their note cards and gifts with them. Have a basket up front to receive the gifts and cards and ask those who want to to share what it is they brought. Explain how much Jesus enjoyed spending time with children and how their gifts like the boy in the story can be used in wonderful ways. Thank them for the contributions they make to the church – be it with music, art work, attentiveness in worship, etc.

God is about the work of miracles and invites us to participate in the revealing and unveiling of grace in its many forms. Go with eyes to see and ears to hear God's presence and expressions of love conveyed through God's people – young and old – as you enter this new week. How might God be asking you to contribute to the revealing of grace to others? What has been placed in your care to pass on to others – small as it might be? Little is always much in the hands of Christ.

Week 3: Found faithful in much

Scripture

He said to him, "Well done good servant, because you have been trustworthy in a small thing, take charge of ten cities." *Luke 19:17*

Sermon starter

As we mature in the faith, we are sometimes called to give of ourselves for the sake of others – even to the point of taking risks. In what ways do our financial decisions and the use of other resources reflect our faith values? The call to tithe and/or give sacrificially is to take a risk in the eyes of the world. What risks are God calling us to as a congregation when it comes to being found trustworthy and faithful?

In this story, we are no longer talking about fish and bread. The ante has been raised and the setting is a nobleman's court. Many think Jesus is making reference to an actual event involving the three sons of Herod the Great, who died in AD 4. The one son, Archelaus, to whom Judea had been left as an inheritance, went to Rome to verify this title as a son of Herod the Great. Those listening would have quickly made the connection with this despised man who would be their king.

Certain lessons would have been gleaned from this story.

1. If the evil king Archelaus trusted his stewards, how much more does God trust you?
2. Whenever trust is extended – that trust is also tested. God trusts and tests us to make us stronger.
3. If an evil king rewards those who have been faithful to him, will God also not reward those who are found faithful?

There is no such thing as standing still in life. To be alive is to experience the ups and downs, the rewards and the uncertainties of living in a fallen world. But don't give up. God will keep nudging and refining us because God loves us. The reward of work well done is often more work, more trust, more testing and more engagement with the Master of the Universe.

Children's lesson

Last Sunday, you brought a gift to the service. How did it make you feel to do this? Doesn't it feel good to be able to share and help someone else? This Sunday, we want to share with you a lesson about another form of generosity. I have envelopes to give out. In each envelope are 40 stickers. Ten stickers are red and 30 stickers are blue. We want you to do a little experiment. Go up to 10 different people you know and appreciate and give them one of your red stickers as well as a handshake or a hug or a high five and tell them one thing you appreciate about them.

Then give these same persons three of your blue stickers and suggest they go and do the same to someone else. Generosity and encouragement can be contagious. As you bless someone else, the blessing comes back to you and the one you blessed will want to share the same with others. Since we have been blessed with a great church and families and so much love – let's spread it around. This kind of gift will never run out and it is so needed today.

Week 4: Found faithful with all

Scripture

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

Matthew 13:44

Sermon starter

Sometimes faithfulness calls for a total surrender of all that we have for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Have you ever seen this lived out, as was the case in the story told by Jesus in Matthew 13? Giving away everything may be something that is done symbolically or literally. The surrender of our lives to serve others as did King Henry III or the leader of the monastery are two such examples. This final Sunday, we will suggest that you conduct a special service of holy consecration/blessing of all that we have and all that we are for the service of God.

A more modern story is told of a woman who finds a valuable pearl in an obscure shop. The merchant says he will give it to the woman in exchange for everything she has. Wanting badly to own the pearl, she writes a check for several thousand dollars, emptying her savings and checking accounts. The merchant asks, "What about your house?" The woman signs over the deed. "What about your two cars?" She signs them over to him. "What about your boat and your vacation home? Your stocks and bonds, retirement funds and life insurance?" The woman transfers all of these to the merchant.

Then the merchant says, "Now the pearl is yours." The woman is delighted! She turns to leave, but the merchant stops her, saying, "Here is all that you have given me to purchase the pearl; I am giving these to you. They still belong to me, but I will let you have full use of them for as long as you live. The only thing I ask is whenever possible - share my houses, my cars, and other wealth with those I send your way." The woman is overcome with joy, "Of course, thank you!"

"Remember," says the merchant, "you may use these things as if they are your own, but on occasion, I will ask you to share them or even give them away to others."

Continue to work with the practical implications of this demanding text from Matthew 13. Address your reflections to the congregation based on these key questions:

1. What do you think the pearl represents? What about the shop, the woman and the man?
2. How is this modern story similar to the one Jesus told and what added meanings are suggested about our relationship to God and the stuff that we have been given?
3. What concerns or questions does it create for you, your relationship with God, and the possessions God has given into your care?

Challenge the church to consider increasing its giving as an expression of trust in God. This series has opened a number of important themes concerning generosity and what we are called to be and do in our journey to being found faithful.

Many of us may not be where we want to be in our giving, but we can all respond by taking the next step. It might be increasing our commitment by just 1 percent in the direction we know we need to go. God will be found faithful to you.

Children's lesson

Some congregations have Sundays where they have special prayers of dedication or consecration for the beginning of a new school year, sending members on service trips, pets, motorcycles, etc.

This Sunday, invite the children to come forward and join hands with the pastoral staff and anyone else you want to join you. Ask if any of them have stories to share about the giving of their red and blue dots. Explain that you are concluding the series of lessons on being *found faithful*. And that you want them to lead out with prayers of what it is they are thankful for. It could be a one-word prayer or a sentence or two. After each person shares, lead the congregation in saying together – “For this we give you thanks.” Feel free to open the time of sharing for adults as well.

To conclude this time, acknowledge that all we have is a gift from God. And that we recommit ourselves to be wise and generous stewards of all that we have been given – for the gift of time, for the gift of talents and for the gift of money and material goods. Amen. Might it be so.



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