

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer

November 18, 2007

Our Service

Our prayers. Our presence. Our gifts. Our service. Today our 4-week stewardship celebration draws to its close. Today our basket of blessings is full. So far we've shared how our prayers and the prayers of others has touched our lives, what it means to us to be present in worship, and why giving to the church is important to us. Through it all we've been reminded that God has blessed us to be a blessing to others, and every week we have sung our theme song, "Make Me a Blessing." The house and group meetings have all been held, and the mailings have all been mailed. What's left is for us to bring our pledge cards forward for dedication. What's left is for us to celebrate one last time how upholding the church through our membership vows blesses us to be a blessing to others. We pray. We participate. We give. And we serve. We uphold the church with our service.

There isn't a church in existence anywhere that doesn't need its members and friends to engage in some kind of voluntary service. You know we can't get through a week here at Redeemer without your help: teaching Sunday School, visiting shut-ins, making phone calls, cooking food, driving people places, singing in the choir, ringing bells, dancing, setting up tables, organizing events, counting money, washing dishes, pulling weeds, leading meetings, greeting and ushering, stuffing envelopes, decorating the altar, decorating bulletin boards, preparing the newsletter, representing Redeemer at UpCam, Cleveland InterAct, Interfaith Hospitality Network, Black Methodists for Church Renewal, United Methodist Women, Reconciling Ministries, Cleveland Food Bank,

Heights Youth Center, Heights Emergency Food Center, and on and on. Through your service you enable our church to stay involved -- and to carry out its mission and purpose. By upholding the church with your service you give the church its vitality and strength. Through your service our church comes to life.

So -- what else needs to be said? We know all this stuff. Can't we just go on to the next thing in our bulletin, and maybe get home a little earlier today? Well, if the text for today wasn't so thought-provoking, maybe. But it's a rich text -- and just the right text, I think, for our stewardship finale. It's a text that ties service and stewardship together. Hear Paul's words to the Corinthians again:

“Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries.”.

This isn't an either/or job description. We are both, Paul says. As Christians we are servants and we are stewards. But what does it mean to be a steward? Stewards are like managers -- they aren't self-employed but are in charge of someone else's property or business. As managers, their role is to run the operation so that it makes a profit. They are entrusted with authority -- and granted some degree of freedom to organize the way they want to, and to have some say in the hiring of the people who work for them. Managers are responsible for the quality and quantity of the final product. They are held accountable when quotas aren't met or when problems get in the way of the business running smoothly.

Paul tells us we are servants and stewards. We work, therefore, as managers for God. This is work we have all been given by God. None of us is exempt. But in asking us to

be his stewards, his managers, God isn't asking us to do anything we can't do. We are simply asked to act obediently on God's behalf. So hear this: stewardship isn't an extra demand placed on us. It's not an additional burden laid on top of our everyday work. Being a steward for God isn't a second job. Nor is it a specialized line of work, either. Being a Christian means being a steward. We know that. Being a Christian means being a steward. All Christians engage in the practice of stewardship. The question therefore, isn't do we do it, but how well do we do it? The question is always one of faithfulness? Are we loyal stewards? Are we effective managers? Are we trustworthy?

I'm sure most of you here today know something about the Board of Trustees of our church. How many of you have ever served on that Board? Trustees take care of the maintenance of the church building and parsonage. They are guardians of the church, so to speak. Often the work of the trustees is mundane: it's just like taking care of your own house, there's always something that needs fixing: a furnace, dirty carpets, broken light fixtures, a cracked parking lot or driveway. And sometimes the work trustees do seems the furthest from God's work. But guess what? Paul tells us we are all appointed trustees by God. We're all caretakers – stewards – in Christ's church. The problem with thinking about ourselves as trustees is that we can forget who we're working for. So what we have to remember is that we all serve as trustees of Christ's church – not our own. None of us possess this church here at 2420 South Taylor Road in Cleveland Heights, Ohio. Instead we are temporarily charged with carrying out the church's mission in our time. Our lives and our work last only a moment in the history of God's amazing grace. But even so -- our work is crucial -- for we are entrusted with passing the church on to those who come after us.

So let's get this straight: As Christians we are stewards. One way to think of this is as managers; another helpful image is that of being a trustee. The point is the same. It's a job every Christian is given. In business, only a few work in management. Not true in the church. Every Christian works for God, managing the life God has given us, overseeing God's work in the world. The same is true for that of trustees. While Redeemer trustees get a phone call from someone on the Lay Leadership Committee asking them to serve a 3-year term, and while that person can accept or refuse the nomination, the process is a little different for us as trustees of Christ's church. There's no nomination. There are no term limits. We all have the freedom to accept or reject Christ. We all have the freedom to join or not join Christ's church. But once we've accepted Christ and once we've come into the fellowship of the Christian community, serving as a trustee of Christ's church isn't optional. It's expected of us. It comes with the territory. We are the people -- not someone else -- we are the people responsible for carrying out God's purposes. We have a job to do; we have a charge to keep.

The work we do, though, doesn't bring much recognition or opportunities for advancement. Being God's stewards doesn't put us on the ladder of success. For even as God's stewards we always remain servants of other people. We are God's managers -- and that sounds important and it is important -- but the way we manage is through our service to others. So it's not a glamorous or prestigious job, is it? It involves a lot of nitty-gritty work. A life of Christian service is hands on work -- and glory moments are few and far between. We don't get much public recognition for our working as God's serving stewards. The job's never finished either. There's always more to do. Let's lift up some examples now: how about all the people going every week to visit and take care of Mary and Emory Lynch -- buying groceries, cooking

meals, washing hair, straightening up the house, taking them to appointments, figuring out their long-term care, working with them on their finances and on their legal matters. Some of you have been going every week for a whole year now -- on your own, just doing what needs to be done. Or how about those of you who help with the InterAct meal -- passing out meatloaf and cake pans, delivering them to Calvary Church, preparing and serving the meal at the church, cleaning up afterwards -- there's camaraderie of course, but it's not glamorous, is it? In the summer it's hot in that kitchen -- and always you leave feeling good that people got fed one more day -- but knowing that they'll be back because one meal isn't enough -- or how about those of you who plan our fellowship events -- buying the decorations and the food, getting everything ready, seeing to all the details while everyone else comes and eats and leaves -- staying behind to clean up and put everything away -- none of this is glamorous, and none of this leads to much recognition -- and when one thing is done, there's always something else to do.

Fortunately we have our whole lifetimes to do God's work. Stewardship isn't a job we retire from. Nor is it a job we have to wait to get. It's ours from the day we know ourselves to be a Christian until the day we die. How we carry out the job will of course change during the course of our lives. Little children serve as stewards in certain ways, and grown ups in others. When we are elderly homebound church members our circumstances are different than when we are a young parent raising a family. But the job is still ours. Serving the Lord is life-long. So is stewardship.

And what exactly is this stewardship thing again? Simply put, stewardship is our witness to God's saving activity in the world. Stewardship is how we put faith and

practice together. It's how we join our heads and hearts and hands. Our stewardship isn't supposed to be a big secret. It's not just a private agreement we have with God. We are to be visible in our work as God's stewards. We are to be seen and heard.

What is it then that we do and say? Paul tells us we are stewards of God's mysteries. Stewards of God's mysteries. Now that's a clear job-description, isn't it? How can we understand, let alone do, something like that? Here's what I think -- and I may be putting words in his mouth, but I think Paul is referring to all the mysteries of life which God is involved in. People everywhere have the same basic human experiences: we are born, we are provided for, we have relationships with other people, we live in community, we die. These are the common denominators of our human experience. And we can either see God at work in these things or not. Our job as God's servants and stewards, I think, is to point out the mystery of God's presence in our daily lives. Through Christ we are to witness to the mystery of God at work behind and in all our human experiences. That is why as stewards we say this is God's good earth; let us take care of it for God. As stewards we realize that this wife, this husband, this life partner, these children, these friends, are signs of God's good love; let us therefore nurture these relationships and let us love each other as God loves us. As stewards we say, here -- this money I earn is really a sign of God's mysterious providence in my life, for without God making me who I am and able to do what I do and providing me with health and strength and people to care for me, none of this would be possible, so let me show my gratitude for all that I have received by sharing this money with God for the work of God in this world through God's church.

As stewards we witness to the mystery of God's saving presence in our lives.

Stewardship is therefore a way of life -- it's a way of loving and giving and seeing and speaking -- it's a way of life that in all circumstances and situations celebrates the creator and redeemer and sustainer of life itself.

As Christians we are given this ministry of stewardship. We are called to serve God with our whole lives -- with all that we are and with everything we have -- with our hearts and minds and hands and mouths, through our prayers and presence and gifts and service. Let us be God's trustworthy stewards here at Church of the Redeemer. May our lives show that God can indeed depend on us to do our part, to witness to God's saving grace in all of life. Amen.