

Stewardship

*A Sermon Preached at the First Unitarian Church
Of Albuquerque, New Mexico by Christine Robinson
on September 18, 2016*

Reading

In J.R.R. Tolkien's mythical land of Gondor, the ruler is a Steward, not a king, because a thousand years before, the King had gone off to war, leaving a trusted man to rule, "until he should return", but the king had never returned. Such was the loyalty of the House of Stewards that they had ruled; had cared for the land and its people, generation after generation, solved problems, planned for the future, and even gone themselves into battle, and had never sat on the throne or claimed kingship.

Also among the assorted races of Middle Earth are the mysterious, powerful and apparently immortal wizards. As a war is about to begin which may destroy everything that both men have worked to save, Gandalf the wizard, and the steward of Gondor are at odds over tactics.

The Steward declares that, for himself, there is no purpose higher than the good of Gondor, the stewardship of which is his task, unless the King should come again.

And Gandalf answers this way,

"Unless the king should come again? Well, my lord Steward, it is your task to keep some kingdom still against that event... In that task you shall have all the aid (from me) that you are pleased to ask for. But I will say this: the rule of no realm is mine, neither of Gondor nor any other, great or small. But all worthy things that are in peril as the world now stands, those are my care. And for my part, I shall not wholly fail of my task, though Gondor should perish, if anything passes through this night that can still grow fair or bear fruit and flower again in days to come. For I am also a steward. Did you not know?"

Homily

So it turned out that Gandalf the wizard's mission in life was "the care of all worthy things that are in peril." It's a good thing he had magical powers, because that's a pretty big sense of stewardship. The steward of Gondor's sense of responsibility is for the care of one nation. Even that is a lot! But large or small, almost all of us can call ourselves stewards of something. I'm a proud steward of my backyard garden, it's soil and trees. I take care of it, gardening so that the trees thrive and so that the soil is healthy and fertile. In this phase of my life, I am a steward of my parents' lives, but once, they took care of me. And I have a strong sense of stewardship of the church, naturally. That's a professional given, but it has sunk deeply into my heart over 28 years.

I know that almost all of you have a few worthy things that you care for, and that care is a part of your own sense of your life's mission, purpose, and joy.

I can tell you that, because many of you told me what your work was, when we blessed hands and smart phones and backpacks and other symbols of our life's work last week. You care for children and elders, for customers needing help, for prisoner: you are healers, teachers, and makers of beauty. You help out in the church office, the botanical garden, the museums and parks around town. You might say it's your calling. You are stewards of some of the worthy things of the world.

And so much is in peril in the world. Peace is threatened, democracy, even, it sometimes seems, basic human decency. The health of the planet is threatened by our society's addiction to polluting fuels. Our national health is threatened by a polarized political system and by politicians who would rather do harm than compromise and govern. Sometimes I just have to turn off the news because so much seems threatened that I care about.

I am not a wizard; I am neither immortal nor powerful, nor, even like the humble hobbits of Tolkien's tale, called out of smallness into the very center of the fray. I am one, fairly ordinary American person; mother, wife, minister, citizen, child of God. But I am also a steward, not of a nation, nor of all worthy things, but still of a few worthy things, the ones that come into my sphere. And my stewardship; my caretaking of things that do not belong to me; my stewardship is at the center of my life and my values. That is how I live with some peace and joy in the face of all that seems threatened with hatred, greed, and short sightedness.

It's an old fashioned word, "Steward," but it means a lot to me, and I want to share it with you, because you, too, are stewards, you care for precious things and foster precious things with your lives, and it is good to remember that.

It's been almost a generation since the world's tree-huggers introduced us to the now widely accepted idea that human beings are supposed to care for the earth rather than exploit it. Environmental Stewardship is a mainstream term, and means that a part of our sense of being good people comes from living somewhat lightly on the earth, recycling what we can recycle, preserving open space, and so on. We don't always live up to our values and it seems that this is one of the places that our society has recently turned from what we wish our collective values were, but at least the concept is a part of our lives, our children's education, and our social structures. And for many of us, being a good steward means, as it did for the Stewards of Gondor, that we treat the earth and its sturdy but not invulnerable systems of healing and renewal with care and responsibility, generation after generation; that we solve problems, make plans for the future, even make sacrifices, for an entity that is larger than ourselves and which we will never claim as our own.

That's what good stewards do: loyally and wisely take care of what is not their own. From the wine steward of a fine restaurant, who cares for the wine, to the stewardess on an airplane, whose first responsibility, as we are often reminded, is the safety of the passengers, to the great stewardship that Gandalf claimed...of all worthy things that are imperiled, stewards care for what is larger than their own lives and small interests. It is a trust bestowed upon them; by the owners

or the restaurant, the flying public, by God, by our sense of understanding that, since we hold it our hands, we must take care of it.

Parenthood is a kind of stewardship. We care, as wisely and tenderly as we can for our children, all the while helping them to become their own persons, not ours. “ Grandparenthood brings a kind of extended stewardship of the sons and daughters of life, so does mentoring, teaching, tutoring and care-giving.

Citizenship is a kind of stewardship, which is why so many of us vote, even when it is inconvenient, when there are no perfect options, when we just wish the whole thing would be over. That’s why I know that many of you will go to the polls 6 weeks, because you are good citizens...good, if perhaps discouraged stewards of our nation.

Most of us practice some forms of stewardship of the environment. Our parking lot tells the tale, as do our bike racks. Some of us, and to some extent, try not to drive frivolously, look into fuel economy before we buy cars and appliances, and discipline ourselves to enjoy simple pleasures and resist what some have called “retail therapy.” We support many environmental causes, use water frugally in this desert, and most of us support laws that help businesses act responsibly, even when they raise costs. We care for something larger than we are, something that does not belong to us, looking to a future we will not be present to share. It is really very satisfying, when it comes down to it.

We are also stewards of the worthy organizations we belong to and benefit from, including this church. These institutions are extensions of our values and priorities and dreams; they are larger than we are, and serve our own lives and others’ lives.

Angela and Dan told you their stories of entering ministry in the last couple of weeks ...Here’s a part of mine. I entered ministry because I discovered as a child that the church could play a crucial role in people’s lives. I learned that because it played a crucial role in mine. You see, while I was loved and wisely parented at home, neither I nor my parents could quite figure out how to help me negotiate school successfully. I was smart enough but didn’t do very well, didn’t have many friends, was frustrating to everybody I met and even had some behavior problems. Later in my school life I realized that I had learning disabilities, and even later, watching my son and his cousins negotiate schooling, I realized that the Robinson clan just grows up a little more slowly than average. So my elementary school years were kind of miserable. I struggled with what seemed like a very inhospitable world and with adults who were mostly impatient with me.

But in Sunday School, I thrived. There, spelling, writing on the line, showing your math work didn’t matter, what mattered was the willingness to talk about ideas. In Sunday School, I was a star. My teachers doted on me, called on me to do extra fun things, chose me to speak for the class and to help them out. During my middle childhood, while my brain was catching up to the world’s expectations, the community offered by the River Road Unitarian Church saved me, offered me a sense of being competent...even gifted, in the world outside my home. You can’t imagine...or maybe you can... how much that meant to me. Can you ever repay a debt like that? Only by offering that care and community to others.

I also learned, early, that a church can play a role in the world. Situated in the near suburbs of Washington DC, River Road Unitarian church was very active in the Civil Rights movement during my childhood. I learned from watching my parents and elders, that there is power when people organize to do good things together, and that the church is a platform and a container for that kind of organizing.

And so, when it came time to choose my vocation, I cast my lot with the church. And became one of its stewards. And counted and count that stewardship as one of the most important works and satisfactions of my life.

I know that many of you have similar stories and feelings about the church. I've heard them. And you will get to hear some, in these weeks of the Stewardship campaign. In greater and smaller ways we will all, I hope, become more aware of the ways this community serves us and others, and more aware of the ways that our own stewardship; in this and other places, is an important part of our lives.

We are rarely stewards alone. We depend on others who are also stewards; the church's leaders, it's hundreds of volunteers, the many who give generously to all of the programs and services, employees and materials, spaces and property that makes this church what it is. It's all larger than any of us, and none of it belongs to any one of us, but I cast my lot, day after day, with you, and with those who come before and after; who, over time, work to make our world more fair and all her people one; to save what can be saved so that it can thrive and grow and bear fruit for the greater good, in years to come. Are you with me? Then we are stewards together. May that stewardship be fruitful and satisfying, through all the days of our lives.

You might have noticed that this was called a homily, not a sermon, and that's because it was meant to be short and sweet, and give plenty of time for the party in the social hall and on the patio which is a part of our celebration of our stewardship this morning, our stewardship of this place, the community it gathers, the growth, learning, and service it fosters, the values it stands for and the people we share it with. May you be blessed by your stewardship of this place, and may our collective stewardship bless each other, and our world.

Now I invite you to stand and take hands, for the closing song and closing words. Circle Round for Freedom.