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Radical Gratitude

Weekly reflections on responding to God's abundant grace

March 6, 2006 - Vol 1, Issue 4

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Dear Brant,

St. Augustine of Hippo wrote, "God is always trying to give good things to us, but our hands are too full to receive them." On this second week in Lent, we will consider practices of "abstinence" and "self-emptying" as pathways for better receiving, enjoying, and sharing Grace. Many blessings on your Lenten journey.



In God's Grace,
Tom Wilson & Tanya Barnett
Stewardship Emphasis Staff
PNW Annual Conference

Stewardship in Season*

The Season of Lent: Living Simply in God's Grace

As last week's reflections in "Radical Gratitude" suggested, Lent is the season in which we reclaim those God-given "limits" (that we may tend to ignore) that actually preserve and enhance our lives and the lives of others. In a culture that teaches us that we "deserve it all," it is indeed countercultural to choose to place limits on our productivity and/or consumption. In making such choices, will others judge us to be lazy under-achievers or frugal fanatics?

This second week in Lent is an opportunity to lay aside concerns of such judgment and examine any life-restoring "limits" that you may feel called to observe – limits that imply a degree of conscious "abstinence" (a word that we often go out of our way to avoid). In this examination, please consider these words from Marjorie J. Thompson:

The concept of abstinence...needs to be considered in relation to the whole of our affluent and addictive lifestyle. Our society voraciously consumes just about any and every thing: food, drink, sex, drugs, guns, cars, clothing, energy, ...fads, ideologies, programs, even work and leisure. ...The world of God's gifts has indeed become a world of mere objects to satisfy temporary and restless appetites. The point of abstinence is not the denial of all enjoyment in life, for as Baptist minister Dallas Willard rightly points out, "We dishonor God as much by fearing and avoiding pleasure as we do by dependence upon it or living for it." The purpose of abstinence is to learn rightly to enjoy God's gifts. (From Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life, pp. 75-76)

In learning to "rightly enjoy God's gifts," we allow ourselves to truly savor unmerited Grace and "natural communion" with God and others. Such savoring provides vital sustenance for our lives as Christian stewards.

Quote & Question for Reflection

From Macrina Wiederkehr's, *A Tree Full of Angels: Seeing the Holy in the Ordinary* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991):

"Fasting makes me vulnerable and reminds me of my frailty. It leads me to remember that if I am not fed I will die. ...Standing before God hungry, I suddenly know who I am. I am one who is poor, called to be rich in a way that the world does not understand. I am one who is empty, called to be filled with the fullness of God. I am one who is hungry, called to taste all the goodness that can be mine in Christ."

What deliberate practice(s) – in your day-to-day life – might help you to feel something like Macrina's sense of "standing before God hungry"?

On the Lectionary



Stewardship reflections on readings for the Second Sunday in Lent

Texts for March 12, 2006: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:23-31, Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

Perhaps like Peter in today's Markan passage, we may find Jesus' words strange and problematic. We all share an instinct for self-preservation and long for varying degrees of security, prestige, and well-being. The notion of "denying" ourselves and "losing" security, prestige, well-being etc. (even losing our own lives) can feel stoic, joyless, and oppressive.**

So, why would we choose to deny ourselves? Why would we choose to model our lives after the One who would suffer greatest insecurity and cruelty, be stripped of prestige, and lose his own life (and, lest we forget, rise again)? [UMC Bishop Kenneth L. Carder writes:](#)

Such an image of God is as objectionable and foreign to us as it was to Peter. We want an invincible God, a Super God, who shields us from our own vulnerability. ...Strength in weakness, gaining by losing, the power of the cross – that still seems foolishness to those who measure strength by Gross National Product and megaton bombs, those devoted to finishing first and those who thrive on power as prominence.

"Strength in weakness, gaining by losing..." do seem utterly foolish in today's world. But the

Christian is called to boldly proclaim (to use author Macrina Wiederkehr's words), "I am one who is poor, called to be rich in a way that the world does not understand. I am one who is empty, called to be filled with the fullness of God." Like Sarah and Abraham in their "barren" state (see today's Genesis reading), the "one who is empty" stands open to receive and share the fullness of Grace.

Footnote

**On this point, we must acknowledge that the glorification of self-denial and suffering has been/are used as justification for acts/systems of oppression; see, for example, *A troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, Emille Townes, editor.

Click here to link to Common Lectionary readings and UMC preaching/worship helps

Stewards: Aware & Active

Awareness

Consider these hunger and food statistics:

- Percentage increase, between 1999 and 2004, of U.S. households in which there was hunger due to poverty: 22% (1)
- Average percentage of its food that an American household wastes: 14% (2)

Action

(A) Ask yourself and/or discuss with your family/friends/church family:

- "What are the foods (e.g., 'junk' and over- processed foods) and/or eating habits (e.g., eating alone, while driving, in front of the TV, eating too much or too little) that, if I were to give them up, would actually enhance my quality of life?"
- "What are the foods (e.g., 'FairTrade' coffee, foods grown by local farmers) and/or eating habits (e.g., eating with someone who may be lonely, sharing my 'food dollars' with someone who needs them more than I do) that, if I were to consciously chose them, might help me to feel closer to God and others?"

(B) During this week of Lent, put one or more of your responses into action.

(C) Also during this week, pray for the growing number of hungry (physically and spiritually) people in our country and around the world. Pray to understand the nature of your own hungers and how best to meet them.

Footnotes

(1) [Harpers Index](#), February 2004.

(2) The Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology, University of Arizona (Tucson); found in [Harpers Index](#), April 2005.

"Christian Stewards...

are those who awaken to God's abundant, freely given grace permeating all creation. As expressions of their awareness, stewards choose to enter into active partnership with God and others to lovingly care for and heal every gift of grace that God entrusts to them. As stewards grow in this partnership, every dimension of their lives becomes a witness of the living Christ and a channel for God's grace poured out to all."

–The “working definition” of Christian stewards, presented by the Stewardship Emphasis, PNW Annual Conference

***"Stewardship in Season":**

- Winter: Advent-Epiphany -- "Awakening to God's Grace"
- Spring: Lent-Easter -- "Living Simply in God's Grace"
- Summer: Early Pentecost -- "Helping to Unveil God's Grace"
- Autumn: Late Pentecost/Kingdomtide -- "Sharing God's Grace"

All materials in "Radical Gratitude" were researched and prepared by the PNW Annual Conference's Stewardship Emphasis staff and advisory group. You are welcome to forward and/or reproduce these materials for church use (please cite "Radical Gratitude," www.umfnw.org).

We encourage all friends and members of the Conference to share stewardship stories, quotes, ideas, and questions with us -- so that we can share them with other "Radical Gratitude" readers. Thank you.

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