

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Psalm 81:1, 10-16  
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

First United Church of Christ, Northfield  
Rev. Sandra K. Johnson  
September 2, 2007

### Preservation and Stewardship

Here's how the Valley Grove Preservation Society is described on their website:

*The Valley Grove Preservation Society members are stewards for the white clapboard Valley Grove church built in 1894 and for the 50 acres of rolling prairie grasses and trees at the site. [From the Valley Grove Website]*

I am surprised and theologically delighted with the language! Those who care for the graceful buildings and are restoring the ancient prairie – these people are stewards. They are not caretakers or curators or conservators; they are not homesteaders or real estate developers. They display the two distinct characteristics of stewards: they care deeply and persistently for the well-being of what is entrusted to them, and they understand that what is entrusted to them does not belong to them. Our own Board of Trustees and the Sanctuary Committee are particularly visible stewards in our congregation right now, as they oversee the renovation of our beloved sanctuary.

The work of stewardship is one of the key disciplines of the Christian faith. It is a discipline that rests upon the understanding that all we have comes from God and ultimately belongs to God. It is a particularly difficult discipline to maintain because it is so contrary to the way we think and speak in our everyday life. We talk about owning our homes, our cars; we feel as though we own our children (at least in an emotional way). We feel that we own our own lives, accomplishments, and ambitions; and for that matter, that we own our sins, disappointments, and griefs, and mistakes. The theological claim that all of these things actually belong to God requires us to push back against all of that everyday language and all of those everyday assumptions, and to insist that God is the owner as well as the ruler of the universe.

This theme of stewardship – of caring generously and consistently for what has been put in our hands – is found frequently in scripture. Throughout their history the Hebrew people were called upon to care for the widows and orphans, to leave their fields for gleaning by the needy, and to tithe to the temple. For his part, Jesus told stories and wove parables about caring for what has been given us. The faithful servant who invested his absent master's money, for example, was rewarded for his diligence. The owner of the vineyard paid all of the workers the same wage, regardless of how long they had worked. And there was the foolish man who built barns for his riches only to discover that his life was coming to an end.

Scripture also brings us more general instruction about discipleship, and in those instructions we often find the practices and virtues that make us better stewards. The passage we heard this morning from the book of Hebrews is an example of this: the

ancient author writes of love, hospitality, compassion, generosity, persistence, and faith in Jesus Christ.

The foundation, of course, is love: *“Let mutual love continue.”* [Hebrews 13:1] Stewardship, like other aspects of discipleship, is not a solo sport; it is part of the life of a community. It is because of our love and respect for one another that we are able to work together to love and respect land, buildings, principles, traditions, and relationships. You know, I am sure, that I am not speaking here of romantic love or erotic attraction. The love that binds us together is itself a discipline – the discipline of extending ourselves for the spiritual growth and wellbeing of ourselves and others.

We are also instructed to practice hospitality: *“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”* [Hebrews 13:2] Remember, please, that hospitality is not the same as friendliness or good manners. Hospitality is the active process of making room for someone else – even when we do not like or are afraid of the “someone else.” We show our hospitality by moving over to leave space to sit or stand; we also show it by moving our own preferences and habits out of the way so there is room for other ways of thinking and acting.

Hospitality is a kind of stewardship. It is a way of acknowledging that our space, our time, our concern – all of those things belong to God and are to be shared with the people that come into our lives. That’s true whether we are greeting a guest or visitor in the church, welcoming new people into our community, or working for peace in the world.

Stewardship also demands compassion: *“Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.”* [Hebrew 13:3] The core of stewardship is this ability to feel what someone else is experiencing; literally, the word compassion means to suffer together. Exercising compassion has the effect of broadening our view of events, and the more we see and understand the history, needs, and longings of other people, the wider our web of care giving extends. Compassion brings a kind of humility, putting us in our place – which is not always “front and center”! It is our ability to step into the shoes of future generations, for example, that motivates us to conserve our natural resources and devise ways to live more sustainably on our planet.

Stewardship also requires a particular kind of generosity. Those of you who are accustomed to think of “stewardship” as being primarily about the church’s annual pledge drive may be surprised at the instruction to *“keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have;”* [Hebrews 13:5]. Please notice that the warning is not about money, but about the love of money. A faithful steward is one who uses money as a tool and not as a goal. Money is required for the many ministries of the church, but we do not invite people to support the church just to make the programs happen. We invite people to support the church first, as a testimony to their faith, and

second as a practice of generosity – a practice that calls upon us to think of others before we think of ourselves.

Stewardship is also fed by persistence. The text exhorts its readers to “*remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you,*” [Hebrews 13:7] I believe the emphasis here is on remembering the experience of hearing the word of God, not on the particular person who may have brought the good news of the Gospel. The word “remember” may sound rather tame, but is actually quite powerful: to re-member is to reattach a part that has been lost. Our recurring and persistent task as Christian disciples is to reconstruct our faith again and again as our lives change, our questions shift, and our experience of the Holy is renewed and refreshed.

And so the last virtue mentioned in the text is faith – the ongoing relationship we have with the creator of life, the word of truth, and the spirit of love. Faith is, I remind you, not an accomplishment or a personality trait, but a commitment to living a life “in Christ.” It is not a matter of trying to believe things that we believe are counterfactual; it is not a matter of trying to follow rules that can be teased out of scripture passages. Faith is a verb – active rather than passive, transitive rather than intransitive. Faith is what we do in order to listen to God’s voice, and it is what we do in response when we have heard that voice.

All of us are called, I believe, to be good stewards: good stewards of the earth and its creatures and resources, good stewards of our own skills and talents, good stewards of the material possessions that come into our hands, and good stewards of our emotional and spiritual lives. At the heart of that call is the realization that, as we sang a couple of weeks ago (in the lovely hymn by Brian Wren)

We are not our own, Earth forms us, human leaves on nature’s growing fine,  
Fruit of many generations, seeds of life divine.

Through a human life God finds us; dying living, love is fully known,  
and in bread and wine reminds us: we are not our own.  
[New Century Hymnal #564]

So let us look not only to scripture and tradition, but also to our good neighbors here in Nerstrand, to learn how to be good stewards in all that we do.

Prayer for September 2, 2007 (At Valley Grove Church)

Almighty and everlasting God, creator of all things seen and unseen, hear now our silent prayers, as we open our hearts to you in the sacred quietness.

God of faith and hope, we bring before you our prayers for those we have named this morning – we especially remember ... Bring to each of them the gifts of mercy and grace that are most needed, according to your wisdom and love.

God of all the earth, we offer our prayers this morning especially for the prairies that were home to our ancestors, and which are preserved here for generations to come.

We thank you first for the beauty of the prairies, and for the variety of plants and animals that have made them their home. Open our eyes to see this variety, and our minds to understand the complexity and elegance of the ecosystem that is all around us. Keep us mindful of the sacred connections among all these living things, including ourselves.

We thank you, too, for the fertility and lushness of the prairie, and for the ways that humans have used that fecundity to feed their neighbors and, indeed, the whole world. We are grateful, too, for the settlers and families who have made their homes here, and for their vocations of farming, dairying, herding, and orcharding.

Still, Creator god, we must confess that we have not always protected and cared for our land, and especially for our prairies. We have considered human needs, but neglected to consider the needs of the fauna and flora that were here before we arrived. So we pray that we will be good stewards of the gift of the land, so that it will be a blessing to our children and our grandchildren, and their grandchildren.

And we confess, Lord, that we have not always protected and cared for our neighbors who work the land. We have let our desire for convenience and economy be the excuse for low wages and poor conditions for farm workers, and for complicated regulations and financial uncertainty for farm owners. Forgive our selfishness, we pray, and nudge us into awareness of all the costs of what we eat, including the ones we do not pay.

God of all creation, let our love for these prairies remind us of the love of all people for the land that nourishes and nurtures them. Renew our resolve to honor and respect all of your creation: the mountains and mesas, the coastlands and deserts, the marshes and lakesides.

All this we pray in the name of the one who lived among us on this earth, and lives among us still as our Risen Savior, even Jesus the Christ, and we pray together now in the words that he taught us ....

