

“SS Stewardship”  
Psalm 24

In his book, *The Active Life: Wisdom for Works, Creativity, and Caring*, Parker J. Palmer tells about a cartoon he has kept above his desk for several years, “It shows a vast, flat plain stretching off into the distant horizon, with only a few rocks and scrubby plants scattered across it. There are numerous small groups of people out of the plain; working the ground with pickaxes, shovels, and wheelbarrows, while in the foreground stand two people with blueprints, who are supervising the work. The caption under the cartoon reads, 'Early Work on the Grand Canyon.'" This cartoon is a strong reminder for Palmer of how ludicrous it is for human beings to think that we are in control. He says that we speak of, “making money, making friends, making changes. We also speak of making time, making love, making peace, making a deal, making our way, making a mark, making things right, making meaning, making a living, and — to cover all the bases — making 'it'... Clearly, we regard ourselves as the manufactures of nearly everything under the sun, including things that we cannot possibly make. I suppose we can make a deal or make a mark. But can we really make things right, or make peace, or make love? And surely no one, no matter how smart or skillful, can make time.”

The wisdom of faith is about letting go of the illusion of control and of owning everything in the world. What faith offers us is the invitation to embrace life as a gift from God, a gift that is to be shared with others. This is the invitation of Psalm 24. This is a Psalm of praise to God as the creator and sustainer of the universe. The Psalms were communal songs that were sung by the people of Israel for different occasions. Psalm 24 is one of the Psalms of praise which was sung by the people of Israel for entry into the Temple in Jerusalem, most likely for the festival of New Year. The opening statement of this Psalm is an acknowledgement of God’s ownership of all of creation. This is not about seeing God as the controller of everything and seeing ourselves as little servants who only get to take care of things just for a short while until others come and take our place. This image of God’s ownership is not about domination and obedience. It is about the great wisdom of knowing that we belong to God. There is nothing in this world outside of God’s loving presence. We are invited to view and live life as a journey with God. The wisdom of our faith helps us to see that life is not about grabbing and making things happen. Life is about learning to enjoy God’s love in and around us.

Today we begin a three-week journey with a special emphasis on stewardship. In fact, we are inviting you onboard the SS Steward-Ship to explore together the territories of our faith that relate to our gifts and material resources in life. This is not a journey to fundraising. Stewardship is often thought of as the pastor preaching once or twice a year about the need to give to the church budget. We hope that this will be a spiritual journey for all of us and not just an obligation or a chore. This journey is about becoming keenly aware of our connection to God and others. There is an illusion in our lives that things ultimately belong to us. We even think of that in terms of our relationships. But the truth of the matter is that ownership is an illusion. We are connected to God and others. Yet, we don’t own God, others and even our stuff. This is not bad news like we normally hear it said, “You can’t take it with you,” meaning that we

can't take things with us after we die. It is good news because it frees us to live and love in every moment of life to know that nothing is fully lost in God. If we belong to God and everything belongs to God, then all things and relationships ultimately belong to us (or we belong to them). There is no need in this kind of thinking to find security or worth in stuff or relationships. Our security and worth are found in belonging to God. We would not have to define others based on what they have or do not have. We would see them through the eyes of God as brothers and sisters.

So, the starting place for this journey onboard of the SS Steward-Ship is the knowledge that no matter where we are and what we have, we belong to God! Our ship, our church, our homes, our money, our relationships and everything we have belong to God. Our journey onboard the SS Steward-Ship is about receiving and giving it all as a gift. This is what gives us the true freedom to be fully human, to be true to who we are as children of God. When we can proclaim and sing with the words of the Psalm that "the earth is the lord's and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it" then we can truly live life to its fullest. Richard Rohr writes in his book, *Everything Belongs*, "I believe that we have no real access to who we really are except in God. Only when we rest in God can we find the safety, the spaciousness, and the scary freedom to be who we are, all that we are, more than we are, and less than we are."

The trouble always comes when we replace our hunger and love for God with love of success and possessions. Even when it comes to our financial giving to the church, it is tempting to look at it as a sign of our financial success in life. Or the church could also be tempted to define its success by the size of its building, the number of people who attend or the amount of money that it has. Or we can think that people who give more money are more important to God than others! This would be like the story of the two men who were shipwrecked on a desert island. One of them is going crazy; panicking, screaming at the top of his lungs, "We're going to die! There is no food here, there is no water, we're going to die!" The other man is sitting back, his hands behind his head, resting up against a palm tree, enjoying the lapping of waves on the shore, and his friend says, "How can you just sit there like that? We're going to die!" And the second man says, "Don't worry, I make \$100,000 a week. We are not going to die." The first man says, "What does that have to do with it? Money can't help us! We are going to die!" The second man responds, "Don't worry. I make \$100,000 a week, and I tithe \$10,000 a week to my church. We are not going to die." The first man cries, "It doesn't matter! There is no food or water here! No one is coming to rescue us! We are going to die!" And the second man says, "Listen- I give \$10,000 to my church every week. Believe me, my pastor will find us!"

In his book, *A New Earth*, Eckhart Tolle notes that, "The people in the advertising industry know very well that in order to sell things that people don't really need, they must convince them that those things will add something to how they see themselves or are seen by others; in other words, add something to their sense of self. They do this, for example, by telling you that you will stand out from the crowd by using this product and so by implication be more fully yourself. Or they may create an association in your mind between the product and a famous person, or a youthful, attractive, or happy-

looking person...Paradoxically, what keeps the so-called consumer society going is the fact that trying to find yourself through things doesn't work: The ego satisfaction is short-lived and so you keep looking for more, keep buying, keep consuming. Of course, in this physical dimension that our surface selves inhabit, things are necessary and an inescapable part of our lives. We need housing, clothes, furniture, tools, transportation... But we cannot really honor things if we use them as a means to self-enhancement, that is to say, if we try to find ourselves through them...As a spiritual practice, I suggest that you investigate your relationship with the world of things through self-observation, and in particular, things that are designated with the word 'my.' You need to be alert and honest to find out, for example, whether your sense of self-worth is bound up with things you possess. Do certain things induce a subtle feeling of importance or superiority? Does the lack of them make you feel inferior to others who have more than you? Do you casually mention things you own or show them off to increase your sense of worth in someone else's eyes and through them in your own? ...Attachment to things drops away by itself when you no longer seek to find yourself in them."

Onboard the SS Stewardship our motto is "The earth is the Lord's." This is the most important component of our giving to the life of the church and the life of our communities. Trends in financial giving to the church show that the people who give the most are not necessarily the richest people in a congregation. The number one indicator of how much a person gives financially is their maturity of faith. As we get to trust God more in our daily living, we release our hold on our sense of control and our need to make things happen and we are more aligned with God's mission in the world. I invite you today as we board this ship of faith together to ask yourself: Do I trust God and know that all of my life and everything that I have truly belongs to God? At the bottom of these questions lies our deepest longing as human beings, namely our desire and need to know that we fully belong to God's love.

In his book, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, Thomas Long refers to the memoir written by Mary Ann Bird called *The Whisper Test*. Mary Ann Bird was born with multiple physical problems. She was deaf in one ear and had a cleft palate. Her face was disfigured with a nose that wasn't straight. Her feet were deformed. The teasing words of her classmates left emotional scars. Long writes that for Mary Ann, "one of the worst experiences at school . . . was the day of the annual hearing test. The teacher would call each child to her desk, and the child would cover first one ear, and then the other. The teacher would whisper something to the child like "The sky is blue" or "You have new shoes." This was "the whisper test"; if the teacher's phrase was heard and repeated, the child passed the test. To avoid the humiliation of failure, Mary Ann would always cheat on the test, secretly cupping her hand over her one good ear so that she could still hear what the teacher said. One year Mary Ann was in the class of Miss Leonard, one of the most beloved teachers in the school. Every student, including Mary Ann, wanted to be noticed by her. . . . Then came the day of the dreaded hearing test. When her turn came, Mary Ann was called to the teacher's desk. As Mary Ann cupped her hand over her good ear, Miss Leonard leaned forward to whisper. "I waited for those words," Mary Ann wrote, "which God must have put into her mouth, those

seven words which changed my life." Miss Leonard did not say "The sky is blue" or "You have new shoes." What she whispered was "I wish you were my little girl."

God is whispering to us today and every day: "I love you and you are mine!" Do we live everyday knowing that we belong to God? Amen.