

Being Good Stewards
Wake Forest Baptist Church
Rev. Susan Parker
Genesis 1:26–31
November 22, 2009

Well, it's stewardship Sunday! While I know that some of you are very interested in today – namely the Stewardship folks, the Finance Committee and perhaps the deacons – most of you are pretty well non-plussed by today. Stewardship drives have too often turned into just asking for money, and that's something to be avoided except for a once a year plea.

There's a reason for skepticism. So many stewardship sermons turn into screeds that create guilt as a way of making us pay up. Some of the more heavy-handed stewardship themes might be:

Give till it hurts – and hurts – and hurts.

If you don't give, God's gonna getcha.

Or there's the cartoon of two figures marooned on a deserted island. One person says to the other: "We'll never be found here. We're doomed!" The other says: "Oh, we'll be found. I make a million dollars a year – and I tithe – so my church will find me!"

There's the more cynical campaign slogan: Anyone can give time and talent; we really just want your money.

Occasionally the slogan is just unfortunate. I was recently reminded of the Duke divinity school grad who, during his first pastorate, was asked to come up with the Pledge Slogan. He went with, "I upped my pledge. Up yours!"

Sometimes the campaigns go on too long. For example, a young family attended a church for the first time during the weeks of the annual stewardship campaign. After several Sundays where there were long, desperate pleas for money, followed by the ushers coming to take up collections from everyone, a young girl, perplexed by the process – and by the length of the services – turned to her dad and said: "If we pay off the ushers now, can we leave before the end of the service?"

I chose this text from Genesis for today as I thought it might help us think anew about stewardship. While the whole of Genesis 1 through the beginning of chapter 2 is a lovely litany to hear, it is in the verses Carter read earlier where we are first given the task of taking care of the world. Later, in the creation account of Genesis 2 and 3, the vocational call is more specific; take care of my garden.

Humanity is beginning to recognize that we've done an awful job of being stewards of the world's resources. As we became able to use technology more fully, we

lost sight of the fact that ruthless efficiency could harm us in a variety of ways. Rather than taking down a few trees to get lumber for building communal housing, we can now clear-cut in just days old-growth forests that took centuries to reach maturity. We have almost completely depleted the rainforest ecosystems of the world, realizing late in the game that we may be killing off more than just trees.

Some have called the rainforests the lungs of the earth because of the efficient way carbon dioxide is recycled into oxygen. Perhaps as much as 25% of the pharmaceuticals market utilizes material from the rainforests, yet only a small percentage of the plant systems there have been tested for such usefulness. Many of the fruits and vegetables now domesticated around the earth began in the rainforests. Rainforest ecosystems are simply amazing; it's not much of a stretch to say they are our Garden of Eden and we are still destroying that Garden.

But the world has a variety of other gardens, too, that we have been killing off. I grew up on a farm where we had a huge garden that sustained us through all the seasons, animals that could be used both for work and for food (though I would not eat them now!), and trees and other items that could be used for heating or cooking – if we had needed them.

Anyone who has taken up gardening recognizes that it can be difficult to coax new life from the ground. It takes time, patience, practice and some sweat and occasional tears to get a good yield. One cannot simply throw seeds into the ground and walk away, expecting to return to a bounteous yield. To be sure, it seems that some plants will grow in spite of everything we do to discourage them, but at the heart of good gardening is the recognition that you don't control everything – you simply try to make good choices about how to encourage growth.

The gardener is a partner with the earth, doing a dance of give and take, work and rest, trying to find a balance that allows both gardener and garden to be at their best. We cannot force plants to grow by sheer will, or by reason, or by the raising of voices. Plants do not care about good intentions about weeding, or whether you are up to date on the latest reading about successful gardening. Likewise, if the gardener spends all his/her time focused on the plants, there's no guarantee of a better return; too much rain, too little rain; too much sun, too little sun; we cannot control each aspect of the dance.

But that description may not resonate with you if you've never gardened. Many have lost touch with the process of growing food, perhaps buying in one grocery store trip foods that were grown all around the world by a dozen or so multi-national farming corporations. It has only been because of the recent economic collapse that people are beginning to recognize how smart it might be to begin growing and sharing locally grown food. It is less likely to be contaminated by bacteria or subject to so many pesticides, has not required use of gas/oil to be shipped long distances, and it encourages us to actually get out and dig in the earth again, giving our sedentary culture a reason to move around and get a bit of exercise! The fact that the food would be fresh, and not have gone through multiple processing steps, might mean that we would get more nutritional value from it, as well.

Then, of course, there is God's garden as displayed in the variety and wonder of the human species. We come in all sizes, colors, genders, ages, cultural backgrounds, and sexual orientations. Though we share common ancestry, there have always been groups of humans who believe that diversity is to be feared rather than celebrated. Gardeners know that hybrid plants are often stronger, more fertile, and more reliable overall, yet human strife has often come from attempts to protect the presumed purity of particular groups of humans.

Just as our belief that we can control the natural world has led to painful consequences, so too have our attempts to control human populations by weeding out those who, at various times, we have found to be inferior, or sufficiently different as to frighten us. Good gardeners appreciate the varieties of the same type of plant and their differences in color, taste or texture. Yet we too often hold humans apart, believing that variety will be a bad thing.

Humanity is God's community garden, lovingly planted by God with the hope that we would love each other as we love ourselves.

Ethnic cleansing, genocide, religious persecution, wide-spread oppression of and violence against women; all of these are desperate attempts at controlling God's human garden. We despair of solutions. Like the problems we have created by overuse of resources and technology that exploits, we recognize that competing governments are not yet ready to wage peace among the world's peoples. It seems that healing will have to begin in local gardens, and grow out into the world.

Wake Forest Baptist Church has been a congregation trying to be good stewards, doing what we can with our expertise and resources to address the care of God's world-wide garden. Through support of our missions budget, we are able to send monies to international, national, state and local agencies. Many of us directly tend the garden of the larger Winston Salem/Forsyth County community by our work as leaders in groups like CHANGE, PFLAG, and Meals on Wheels, to name just a few. Others of us tend actual gardens, and are working on ways to bring fresh foods to local individuals who do not have access to gardens of their own.

Some of us tend our campus garden by teaching, and by being willing to share experiences with students, mentoring them at this crucial juncture in their lives. This is a garden in which our church has said it would like to show better stewardship in the future.

Others tend our congregational garden by signing on to lead Sunday School classes for adults, college students, youth and children, by singing in the choir, by handling the sound system, by helping lead in worship.

Others tend our congregational garden by literally feeding us on Wednesday nights and at our monthly potlucks, and as our deacons have by bringing soup, bread and desserts for today's lunch.

In several recent circumstances where members of our congregation were experiencing difficulties, you stepped in as stewards, doing work that assisted the person and his/her family and friends in important ways. You've sat by bedsides, brought food, sent cards and flowers, and made phone calls, tending the garden of relationships. Some of you have been instrumental in helping congregation members find work when jobs ended, or have provided financial help when jobs could not be found.

We are stewards of God's larger world, to be sure, but we are gathered here, now, as stewards of this garden called Wake Forest Baptist Church.

Our Stewardship campaign slogan for this year is "Remember the future." In 1956, when some of you arrived at this garden, you looked around and saw other people much like yourselves, persons living and working at this college, bringing families with them, sharing a common Baptist background. Over the years, the soil has changed. New varieties of people have arrived both here and in our city. Like real gardeners, we have not been able to control every aspect of this garden. But people find us because of how unusual this garden is, coming from many miles away to help till this soil and prepare crops for the future. They come because they want this garden to exist for their children, and their children's children. We are being asked to prepare the soil now, leaving a garden that will outlive us, continuing to feed people we will never meet.

Many questions still remain about our garden. Multiple gardeners means that many ideas will be shared about how to produce new crops, some ideas that have long been used, others that may surprise and perhaps frighten us, so how we talk to each other, interact with each other, care for each other and love each other will determine whether we can continue to sew seeds here and bring them to harvest.

Throughout our transition process we have talked about our hopes and dreams – and fears, too. But we have continued to believe that God is calling us here. It's that overarching call that matters, not our individual wants and needs. It is God who gave us everything. Every thing. We are not the owners, but the caretakers, so the moment our vision strays to what we want as individuals rather than what God wants for the whole community, we create conditions that could poison the ground.

I've been contacting the people you recently nominated for the Board of Deacons. In subsequent conversations, I asked them to comment on why they hoped Wake Forest Baptist Church would continue. Their comments were all eloquent in their own ways, but there were two particular comments that I thought really captured the richness of this soil.

"I would like to see WFBC continue to exist because it continues to be a loving and nurturing community for those whose theological convictions remain outside many other congregations and because it prompts its members to share that loving and nurturing spirit with the larger community in a variety of ways."

"I want to see Wake Forest Baptist Church continue to exist because it nourishes a group of people that, for the most part, are willing to question and challenge themselves and each other on tough spiritual issues. Blind and frozen

institutional traditions stem from fear and a fundamental lack of imagination, and this is not where love grows.”

All gardeners know, of course, that crops don't raise themselves. Seed money is imperative, and each new season the purchase of items needed to help us prepare the soil and continue to work it. So what we provide monetarily is not to be overlooked.

In a few moments, during our hymn of invitation, I will invite those of you who have not yet turned in pledge cards to come forward and place them on the altar. If you forgot your card, our ushers have extras and will bring one to you if you raise your hand. If you are not able to come forward, you will have a chance to give the card to an usher during our offertory time.

Continue to be in prayer about our garden, and may God strengthen us to be good stewards of the riches we have been given. Amen.