

Stewardship Reflection 2

Last week we began our month's journey in deepening our spiritual conversion by studying ways of becoming better and more faithful stewards, better and more faithful disciples of Our Lord Jesus Christ. We reviewed Our Lord's commandment of loving the Lord Our God with all our hearts, all our minds, and all our strength and loving our neighbor as ourselves. We considered how the world has changed in the past 50 or 60 years and that these changes have had an influence on our focus moving it from God to ourselves – what we want, how and when we want it – doing things our way. We spoke of re-changing that focus from ourselves back to God by seriously pondering and praying about our commitment to being better and more faithful stewards. Stewards who express gratitude for the gifts of time, talent and treasure. Stewards who are thankful to God and express that thankfulness in the expenditure of the gifts that have been given to them.

It was suggested that we start by spending five minutes each day in prayer, in conversation with God, five minutes - only 1/3 of 1% of our day. Within yourself right now answer the question “how faithful was I to spending those five minutes each day with God?”

Faithful is a word that is used frequently in speaking about stewardship. What has God's Word told us about being faithful, being trustworthy – God Word, actually it is part of next week's gospel passage tells us that those who are faithful and trustworthy in small matters will also be so in great matters. Each of us needs to learn from our experience of faithfulness during the past week – were we able to put God first for five minutes? – were we able to give back to God a very small, almost imperceptible, amount of our time? – were we able to see the giver or were we too involved with seeing and experiencing only the gifts? – Where did God rank in the time we spent during this past week? These are questions each of us needs to answer and discuss with God if we are to grow in our relationship with Him, if we are to grow in holiness, if we are to grow into good and faithful stewards.

Today we will explore the deepening of our spiritual conversion through stewardship by looking more closely at the words Jesus shared in today's gospel in the parable of the prodigal son. Two weeks ago when discussing Mary's Mantle I spoke at length about God's mercy and the sacrament of confession/reconciliation mentioning specifically St. Theresa of the Child Jesus, one of three female doctors of the church, also known as the Little Flower, and how she believed

and knew that had it not been for God's graces, had it not been for God removing the stones and rocks from her paths, she would have been the greatest of sinners. Many times you have heard me mention that all of us are sinners we will always be sinners, what we try to do by being better and more faithful stewards is continually recognizing and turning over the sinful areas of ourselves to God asking Him for His grace, His strength, and mercy. We, like St. Therese, need to be thankful to God for removing the stones and rocks from our path so we can continue towards of goal and be faithful to our commitment to grow in holiness

The story of the prodigal son is well known; it has been depicted by many artists. We have a picture representing the father embracing the returning, repentant son hanging on the North wall in the Narthex. Many homilies have been given on this story focusing on the younger son, the older son and the father. Today's focus will include comments on each of the family member from the viewpoint of stewardship and recognizing the giver and not just the gifts.

The younger son experiences a deep conversion because of his worldly encounters and although his decision to return to his father was selfishly motivated, based on self-preservation, he returned to his father with humility and contrition. Certainly when the younger son approached his father and asked for his share of a future inheritance, he was focusing on gifts – gifts he desired and felt he deserved because of his birthright. His focus was totally inward on his wants, his desires, his needs; he was listening to the world and its evil attractions. It was not until he had lost everything – all his materialistic goods that his conversion began. In his extreme need for the necessities of life – food and shelter, he procured a job feeding animals. His hunger was apparent in the comment that he longed to eat the food he was giving to the animals. When he realized that his father's hired workers were treated better than he was being treated, he decided to return and beg not for his sonship but to be a worker. Although he had grown in his humility and his awareness of the emptiness of this world's possessions, he had not grown to understand the love his father had for him and the forgiveness his father was capable of extending to him. The story does not tell us what happened after the father lavished his returning son with love and gifts. It is left for us to ponder. How do we react to Our Heavenly Father when he lavishes us with His love and His gifts? Do we continue on our path toward holiness or do we become enamored by the world's gifts again and gradually turn our focus back to ourselves? That is what these stewardship reflections are about – a challenge for each of us to ponder whether we have accepted God's forgiveness and His gifts but have become enamored by

the gifts and not kept our focus on our gratitude and thankfulness to Him but rather have allowed our focus to return to ourselves. If we truly spend time in prayer with God and ask Him to enlighten us about our relationship with Him, He will do so. We need to ask – We need to give of our gifts, we need to be grateful for our gifts, and with a spirit of thanksgiving offer back to God some of the time God has so freely given us. We need to decide if we are serious about growing in holiness, if we are serious about dying to self, if we are serious about serving God with the gifts with which he has graced us.

The older son seems in the beginning of the story to be walking the right path; a hard working, obedient, diligent son who is doing what is right. But where is his heart? Is his heart filled with love of God and neighbor? Or is he also focused on himself but perhaps in a more socially acceptable way – not committing the outward, obvious sins of his brother. The challenge of stewardship, the challenge of deepening our spiritual conversion requires us to look deep within our hearts. Do we harbor resentment when others, those we see committing sin that we have been given the grace to resist, return, receive forgiveness and are lavished with love, praise and gifts? Are we blind to the self-righteousness within our hearts which gives us permission to judge others, to want to see ourselves preferred to others, to want to receive rewards or recognition for the good we are doing? Do we think that we ourselves are responsible for the good we do, have we forgotten our own sinfulness, how but for God's graces we would commit greater sins than we see in our neighbors?

In my column in this week's bulletin is the Litany of Humility written, it is believed, by Rafael Cardinal Merry Del Val (1865-1930) who was Secretary of State for Pope Saint Pius X – the founder of our diocese. It is a powerful prayer; one I encourage all of you to pray, daily if possible. One could ponder each line and learn much about oneself and one's pridefulness. The last seven intercessions have the response "Jesus, grant me the grace to desire it." So not only does God give us the grace to keep us from many sins, but also he grants us the grace not to desire the world's sins. The last set of intercessions are petitioning that others may be loved more, esteemed more, chosen more, praised more, preferred more – those are indeed difficult intercessions to make unless we are truly committed to growing in holiness, committed to be better and more faithful stewards, committed to dying to self, committed to do God's Will not our will. Our commitment can only be fulfilled by and through God's graces; we need to give

back to Him a portion of the gifts He has given us especially the gift of time so that we can speak with Him, praise Him, petition Him, express our gratitude to Him.

The father figure in this story is compared to God Our Father – he is described as having unconditional love for his children. How hurt his heart must have been when the younger son asked for his share of the future inheritance, how concerned he must have been not knowing where his younger son was or how he was doing. How much joy the father must have had within his heart as he saw his younger son coming towards home. Such joy that he did not wait for the son to approach him; he ran to his son, embraced the son with love before the son could give his prepared speech. How much sadness must have been within his heart when his older son would not join in the festivities, when he saw the envy, jealousy, the resentment within the heart of his older son. His response even to the older son shows his loving acceptance, his unconditional love – all I have is yours, rejoice because your brother was lost and is now found. Do we love like that? Do we forgive before others can even ask for forgiveness? Do we accept others even when we see their flaws? If we are serious about our desire to grow in holiness, if we are serious about our desire to be better and more faithful stewards, we need to be courageous and ask ourselves hard and heart searching questions, we need to be willing to hear God’s answer to our questions, we need to be willing to admit to the sinfulness that lurks in our hearts, and we need to be willing to humble ourselves and ask for God’s forgiveness by frequenting the sacrament of confession/ reconciliation, we need to be willing to ask God for His mercy, for His peace, for His graces to avoid these sins in the future.

Are we in love with God for His gifts or do we love the Giver and seek to mirror His love, His acceptance, His giving? Are we willing to accept the dying to self that is necessary if we are to grow in holiness, to become better and more faithful stewards? Are we willing to express our thankfulness to God for all His gifts even if that means sacrificing, giving up our desires, our wants?

This week again, I ask you to try and be more generous with your gifts especially your gift of time, take time to pray – take that five minutes if that is all you have– and speak with the Father ask him to enlighten you about the condition of your heart – no one else’s just yours. Are there people you resent? People you have not forgiven? People of whom you are envious or jealous? Ask God during your daily prayer time – even if it is only those five minutes – to purify your heart so that you can love, can accept, and can embrace all with the love of the father. Are

there areas in which you need to ask God's forgiveness? Remember the sacrament of confession/reconciliation is offered each week on Wednesday and Thursday evening from 6:00 to 6:45 PM and on Saturdays from 3:30 to 4:30 PM.