

Stewards of the Mysteries of God
1 Corinthians 4:1

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Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. 1 Cor. 4:1

Our church has been putting emphasis on financial stewardship this year for good reason and with good results. The good reason is that we need to keep on solid financial footing and not let things get away from us. The good results are that our building loan is coming down rather quickly, and our proposed budget for 2020 looks to be subscribed by way of your pledges for the year.

Now that the period of asking for pledges is over, I do not mind saying I was more than a little concerned that we might come down with a case of “pledging fatigue”, what with having two pledge drives – Glad Praises and Keeping Faith – take place just months apart in the same calendar year. But you responded readily, gladly, generously, without complaint, and there is gratitude all around.

The work, of course, is not over and done with altogether. Financial stewardship will have to remain an emphasis for us as a way of keeping our heads above water, but we will not need to keep doing it, thank God, at a rate of two pledge drives a year.

This morning I shift your attention to a different stewardship, to one that is beyond the financial. The Apostle Paul names this wider stewardship when he speaks of stewards of the mysteries of God. That was an identity he claimed for himself as a Christian worker, and it is an identity we should own for ourselves as people of God, as individual Christians and as a church.

Break this phrase down with me into three parts and think of what stewards are, what the mysteries of God are, and what being stewards of the mysteries of God entails.

What stewards are

Stewards are not simply faithful handlers of money. That is certainly a form of stewardship, but it is not the sum total of stewardship. A steward, in the full sense of the term, is one who functions as an overseer or caretaker of property that belongs to someone else. A steward is a servant who acts on behalf of another who has entrusted property to him or her to care for and to handle wisely and responsibly. The ideal steward serves the best interests of the owner first of all, and does so by handling the entrusted property with diligent and faithful attention.

That is what a steward is, and we are to be stewards – faithful handlers – of the mysteries of God. So we turn now from naming what stewards are to naming what the mysteries of God are.

What the mysteries of God are

The mysteries of God are, first and foremost, the truths God has revealed about God's existence, character, and the nature of the relationship God wants to have with human beings. The mysteries are what God has made known about how God has acted in human history and how God wants to act in human history. The heart of these truths is contained in scripture and, above all, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. All of it tells of the mind of God, the heart of God, the glory of God, and the purpose of God.

While the mysteries of God are first and foremost what God has revealed, they are also what God has kept concealed. They are, after all, mysteries – truths kept from our view. The prophet Isaiah reminds us that God is God and we are not, and that we do not have the mind of God or the thoughts of God or the ways of God (Is. 55:8). Though much has been revealed in scripture and otherwise, not everything has been revealed. There are mysteries concealed, and we have to be humble about that and steer clear of arrogance about what we think we know.

The mysteries of God are what God has revealed and what God has concealed. They are also what God is revealing. That famous line from John Robinson, the pastor to the Pilgrims, says that God has yet more light and truth to break forth from his holy word. God has not yet said everything that can be said but is even now sending forth light and truth to claim our attention and to guide our steps.

We have been made stewards of these mysteries of God. We are handlers and caretakers of the truths God has revealed, hasn't revealed, and is revealing. And so having thought for a few moments about what stewards are and about what the mysteries of God are, we come to what being stewards of the mysteries of God entails.

What stewarding the mysteries looks like

We are talking now of the work of the church in its every dimension and every department, the work of individual members and of the congregation as a whole. What does this work entail?

Stewarding the mysteries of God takes the form of remembering. This is the church's work of worship. Sunday by Sunday, from Prelude to Postlude, from Call to Worship to Benediction, we rehearse the story of our faith, calling to mind what has been revealed and listening for what God may be in the process of revealing. Worship remembers what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, and places that memory in the context of the real lives of real people so they can imagine what God is doing in the world today. Stewarding the mysteries of God takes the form of remembering the truths of God.

Stewarding the mysteries of God takes the form of learning. We have been given these truths of the gospel. We have had them, many of us, since childhood. But we have had them much like people on *The Antiques Roadshow* who had artwork or pieces of furniture around them their whole lives without knowing the thing's true value. Stewarding the mysteries takes the form of learning how precious the truths of God are and how wonderful it is to have them as part of life.

Stewarding the mysteries of God takes the form of teaching. This is the church's work of Christian education. In it we do not tell people what to think so much as we instruct them in how to think. We help young and old know what the resources of faith are and how to access them and how to use them. Stewarding the mysteries of God takes the form of teaching so people can think for themselves.

Stewarding the mysteries of God takes the form of serving. This is the church's work of mission, of reaching out to our neighbors. It is the life of going out into the field, outside the camp of our safety, and taking a stand for some cause, offering a cup of cold water to someone who is thirsty, and tending the wounds of those who have been beaten by life and thrown to the margins.

Stewarding the mysteries of God takes the form of living in fellowship, loving one another, rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep. (Rom. 12:15)

Paul understood that God gave him the gospel and expected him to do something with it. And so he said to those who read his letter, "Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries."

This is how we should want people to regard us, too. This should be what we work toward, give toward, and live toward. It should not matter if we are not the largest church, or the fullest church, or the richest church, or the what-have-you church. We shall be the right kind of church, a vital congregation, if we are stewards of the mysteries of God, stewards who humbly remember these mysteries, learn them, teach them, serve others, and love one another.

And if you ever wonder how our stewardship is to be judged, perhaps the bottom line can come from Emily Dickinson, though reverently changing her composition to use the first person plural:

If we can stop one heart from breaking,
We shall not live in vain:
If we can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again,
We shall not live in vain.¹

¹ Emily Dickinson, "Not in Vain," in *One Hundred and One Famous Poems*, rev. ed., compiled by Roy J. Cook (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1958), p. 34.