



**SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 27TH, 2020
STEWARDSHIP**

**Stewardship for Love and Freedom
Beating the “Iron Cage”**



The Iron Cage

This is the final week for our consideration of and commitment to stewardship for the next 12 months: 2020-2021. We began three weeks ago with the theme of stewardship as “*giving for life*”. Under the title, “Room to be People: Community Matters”, we thought about the human and theological connection between *forgiveness and freedom*, negatively reflected in the story of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 25:23-35), where neither forgiveness nor freedom was offered by the already forgiven servant to his debtor. We established that forgiveness, genuinely offered and authentically received, reflected in the biblical idea of Jubilee, creates the possibility of space or room for society to be renewed, rejuvenated. We reflected upon the situation of many societies during the 1980s and 1990s – Chile, Argentina, and South Africa to name but three – that were confronted with the absolute imperative of finding an answer to a conundrum of their own making: how to restore their broken communities through truth and forgiveness. It was only through the act of forgiveness by the abused, for the horrendous damage done them, and the parallel acknowledgement and confession, by those who did it, that room, space, life could be recreated amid what was a living death. This is the power that the Gospel offers, and the new life that it furnishes.

Last week, we thought about stewardship as “*giving for need*”, and thought through the issue of what we today call, “*distributive justice*”. We established the priority of “need” in our world over fairness. In reality both are important, but because our understanding of ‘fairness’ is invariably shaped, twisted by our own self-interest, we concluded that need is a more recognizable reality. The story of the “workers in the Vineyard” (Matthew 20:1-16), underscored precisely this point, as all workers received the same daily wage, since their “needs” were similar. We affirmed this idea through the case of the establishment of the Australian basic wage, in 1906 by Mr. Justice Higgins of the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission, a policy that shaped Australian industrial relations for 60 years and built a society that recognized the need of all people, not just some. This broke apart with the adoption of collective bargaining, and weakening of the powers of the Fair Work Commission. This is the power that the Gospel offers, and the distributive justice that it argues for.

Today, we think about stewardship as a “*giving for love*”, a vehicle for promoting both *love and freedom* together. We begin by alluding to the famous German sociologist, Max Weber’s insight that we in developed societies live in an “iron cage”, where our lives are increasingly ‘rationalized’ and determined by iron structures, such as ‘free markets’. In effect, Weber suggests, we have less and less room for such delights as “brotherliness” – today he would include “sisterliness”. For Weber society has lost its enchantment. The Story of the “Two Sons” (Matthew 21: 23-32), is all about the iron cages that the religious mindset goes about creating for itself, where freedom in love and love in freedom” is denied. Let us look at this reading and think it through, recalling that giving for love is what Christian stewardship is all about.

GATHERING

We Prepare Ourselves: Bless the Lord my Soul (Taizé)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3y_2ZStGV58

Invitation to Worship

In the name of God,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit

The Lord be with you

And also with you

We light the Paschal Candle

Hymn: In Christ alone, my hope is found – The Virtual National Methodist Choir of Great Britain

(Words and music by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend, copyright © 2001 Kingsway Thankyou Music)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKJfs8C14yc>

“In Christ alone my hope is found;
He is my light, my strength, my song;
This cornerstone, this solid ground,
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm.
What heights of love, what depths of peace,
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease!
My comforter, my all in all—
Here in the love of Christ I stand.

There in the ground His body lay,
Light of the world by darkness slain;
Then bursting forth in glorious day,
Up from the grave He rose again!
And as He stands in victory,
Sin’s curse has lost its grip on me;
For I am His and He is mine—
Bought with the precious blood of Christ.

No guilt in life, no fear in death—
This is the power of Christ in me;
From life’s first cry to final breath,
Jesus commands my destiny.

No power of hell, no scheme of man,
 Can ever pluck me from His hand;
 Till He returns or calls me home—
 Here in the power of Christ I'll stand.

Opening Prayers

In these prayers Tay writes poetically about the current situation we find ourselves in, caged by Covid, struggling to transcend the isolation we feel, but responsibly, kindly, generously.

1.5 metres, is it still enough for brothers and sisters?

Loving without hearts

Hearts without hands

Hands without actions

Brothers and sisters are locked out 1.5 metres away

***We lose something and
 cage ourselves***

1.5 metres, is it still enough for brothers and sisters?

Giving with love

Loving with joy

Joy with togetherness

Brothers and sisters are free from 1.5 metres

***We find something and
 Tolerate the cage***

1.5 metres, is it still enough for brothers and sisters?

Uncertainty, unbelief, and unpleasant

Turn to certainty, belief and pleasant

With freedom, with loving, with giving

***For we are brothers and sisters
 In the source of life, Christ.***

Amen

HEARING THE WORD

Some Preliminary Thoughts about the Iron Cage of Modernity

The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of technological production which to-day determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into it. This cloak over our lives has become an *iron cage*
Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

“In the midst of a culture that is rationally organized for a vocational workaday life, there is hardly any room for the cultivation of brotherliness, unless it is among strata who are economically carefree. Under the technical and social conditions of rational culture, an imitation of the life of Buddha, Jesus, or Francis seems condemned to failure.”

Max Weber, *Essays in Sociology*

The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the disenchantment of the world.

Max Weber

Exodus 17:1-7- The Law as the vehicle to life

The book of Exodus is formative for Israel's identity as a people, recounting the story of God's dramatic act of delivering them from slavery in Egypt. After the Passover and crossing of the Reed Sea, God leads the people through a forty-year period of wandering in the wilderness, a time of testing and solidifying their community. While God tests the people, they also at times put God (and God's servant Moses) to the test.

The passage for this week is one which appeared earlier in this liturgical year during Lent. It immediately follows last week's reading from Exodus, the story of God's provision of manna to the Israelites in the wilderness. The story unfolds in much the same form as the previous one. The people appear not to have developed much trust in God's providence from the provision of the manna, for here again they complain to Moses that he has brought them out of Egypt only to kill them, this time by thirst rather than hunger. The rhetoric is inflated; in chapter 16, they long for the fleshpots of Egypt, as they themselves are starving. In chapter 17, it is not only they who will perish, but also their children and even their livestock.

In a nutshell, the problem in this reading is that of God's presence. The people's complaint to Moses, so soon on the heels of God's provision of manna, last week, shows they slimly trust in Yahweh's guidance. The account, looks both backward and forward in order to confirm God's reliability as the God of life. In verse 5, the Lord instructs Moses to take the staff with which he parted the Nile, and to go to the rock at Horeb. In the choice of this staff, the Lord reminds Moses and the people of God's liberation in the past Exodus and the crossing of the Reed Sea. Looking forward, the word Horeb is the clue. Horeb is another name for Mt Sinai, where the *torah* or the Law, will be given. As the Hebrews read this account generations after the events, they saw the clues as confirmation of Yahweh as the divine vehicle of life against death, and the Law the means to life.

17 The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, travelling from place to place as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² So they quarrelled with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.”

Moses replied, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the LORD to the test?”

³ But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?”

⁴ Then Moses cried out to the LORD, “What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.”

⁵ The LORD answered Moses, “Go out in front of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.” So, Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarrelled and because they tested the LORD saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

Psalm 78: 1-4, 12-16

The psalm has been clearly selected for its reference in vv. 12-16 to the episode in the wilderness of God bringing water from the rock to give drink to the people. Psalm 78, like Psalm 105, which we have read several times this Pentecost season, is another of the great ‘history’ psalms retelling part of the history of Israel, usually that part to do with the Exodus.

Verses 1-4 comprise the first sub-section of the introduction. They form an invocation to ‘my people’ to listen to the teaching of the psalmist who speaks by way of ‘parable or proverb’, ‘riddle, perplexing saying’. These terms suggest some deep and difficult lesson hidden in the past events to be learned again by later generations. The intent in vv. 1-4 carries on God’s intention in the law or *torah*. Verses 12-16 describe the past deeds of God, namely the escape from Egypt and God’s leadership and abundant provision in the wilderness. In spite of this the people rebelled again and tested God (vv. 17-20). In the Pentateuch account of the wilderness wanderings Israel complained for lack of water and food (cf. Exod 15.22-17.7; Num 11; 20.1-13), but in Psalm 78 the sin of the people is to question God’s care even after it has been clearly demonstrated. Their unsteadfast heart and faithless spirit (cf. v. 8) are not a lack of courage and trust in the face of danger, but a questioning of God’s compassion having just experienced it.

A maskil of Asaph.

¹ My people, hear my teaching;

listen to the words of my mouth.

² ***I will open my mouth with a parable;***

I will utter hidden things, things from of old

³ things we have heard and known,

things our ancestors have told us.

⁴ ***We will not hide them from their descendants;***

we will tell the next generation

the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD,

his power, and the wonders he has done.

¹² He did miracles in the sight of their ancestors

in the land of Egypt, in the region of Zoan.

¹³ ***He divided the sea and led them through;***

he made the water stand up like a wall.

¹⁴ He guided them with the cloud by day

and with light from the fire all night.

¹⁵ ***He split the rocks in the wilderness***

and gave them water as abundant as the seas;

¹⁶ he brought streams out of a rocky crag

and made water flow down like rivers.

Philippians 2:1-13 - To copy Jesus not others

This piece is central to Paul's Letter to the Philippian Christian community and serves as the basis for Christian ethics. In a world where we slavishly copy each other in rivalrous behaviour, which only generates misery for us all, Paul's theology calls us to do the opposite: not to copy each other, but to copy Christ, in an ethics of what is called *kenosis*, or self-emptying. "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."

2 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, **2** then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. **3** Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, **4** not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature^[a] God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature^[b] of a servant, being made in human likeness.

⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! ⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place

and gave him the name that is above every name,

¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

¹² Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

Matthew 21:23-32 -

Behind this account stands the question of authority and its source. For the Jewish religious establishment, authority was grounded in history and tradition...in them. For Jesus, who his predecessor John the Baptist, divine authority is of a more charismatic nature, outside the control of the order established by the Law and Scripture. For Jesus, what ultimately matters, is what is done, not what is claimed. This is a major theme for Matthew's Gospel, as he deals with a significant part of his community who as conservatives, hold the opposite view.

²³ Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you this authority?”

²⁴ Jesus replied, “I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. ²⁵ John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?”

They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn't you believe him?’ ²⁶ But if we say, ‘Of human origin’—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.”

²⁷ So they answered Jesus, “We don't know.”

Then he said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

²⁸ “What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’

²⁹ “I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

³⁰ “Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go.

³¹ “Which of the two did what his father wanted?”

“The first,” they answered.

Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³² For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

Some Thoughts

Ubi Caritas (Where there is Charity) – Audrey Assad

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z_Pp0jKn1zQ

Let's Give: Our Offerings

Doxology

*Praise God, from whom all blessings flow,
praise him, all creatures here below,
praise him above, ye heavenly host,
praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.*

Prayer of Dedication

Hymn: We are Called - St Paul Inspirit Ensemble, The Church of St Paul the Apostle, New York City, David Haas)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rj4N8FMYeY>

Come! live in the light!
Shine with the joy and the love of the Lord!
We are called to be light for the kingdom,
to live in the freedom of the city of God!

Refrain: We are called to act with justice.

We are called to love tenderly.

We are called to serve one another, to walk humbly with God.

Come! Open your heart!
 Show your mercy to all those in fear!
 We are called to be hope for the hopeless,
 so all hatred and blindness will be no more!

Refrain

Sing! Sing a new song!
 Sing of that great day when all will be one!
 God will reign and we'll walk with each other as sisters
 and brothers united in love!

Refrain

Prayers of the People

At the end of each prayer/petition with the words, *Lord Christ, hear our prayers* we say, *“Give us the courage to live through your authority”*

The “Our Father” – “Baba Yetu”, Stellenbosch University Choir A Celebration of racial diversity post-apartheid, singing the Lord’s Prayer in Swahili

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCa8RxaOPW8>

Baba yetu, yetu uliye (Our, our Father who is)
 Mbinguni yetu, yetu, amina (in heaven, our, our, amen)
 Baba yetu, yetu, uliye (Our, our Father, who is)
 Jina lako litukuzwe (let's glorify your name)
 Baba yetu, yetu uliye (Our, our Father who is)
 Mbinguni yetu, yetu, amina (In heaven, our, our, amen)
 Baba yetu, yetu, uliye (Our, our Father, who is)
 Jina lako litukuzwe (Let's glorify your name)
 Utupe leo chakula chetu (Give us today our food)
 Tunachohitaji utusamehe (We need you to forgive us)
 Makosa yetu, hey (our errors, hey)
 Kama nasi tunavyowasamehe (as we forgive those)
 Waliotukosea, usitutie (who do us wrong, don't put us)
 Katika majaribu, lakini (into trials, but)

Utuokoe, na yule, milele na milele (save us, with him, for ever and ever)
Baba...

We Commit Ourselves to Stewardship for the year 2020-2021

The Turkish ceramic bowl with the Tree of Life painted within – an Abrahamic Metaphor common to Judaism, Islam and Christianity sits on the table

Closing Hymn: O God beyond all praising – Villanova Pastoral Singers, Villanova University, Pennsylvania, USA, Michael Perry

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4V-AQbKyg48>

O God beyond all praising,
we worship you today
and sing the love amazing
that songs cannot repay;
for we can only wonder
at every gift you send,
at blessings without number
and mercies without end:
we lift our hearts before you
and wait upon your word,
we honour and adore you,
our great and mighty Lord.

The flower of earthly splendour
in time must surely die,
its fragile bloom surrenders
to you the Lord most high;
but hidden from all nature
the eternal seed is sown -
though small in mortal stature,
to heaven's garden grown:
for Christ the Man from heaven
from death has set us free,
and we through him are given
the final victory!

Then hear, O gracious Saviour,
accept the love we bring,
that we who know your favour

may serve you as our king;
and whether our tomorrows
be filled with good or ill,
we'll triumph through our sorrows
and rise to bless you still:
to marvel at your beauty
and glory in your ways,
and make a joyful duty
our sacrifice of praise.

Blessing and Sending Out

The blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit
Be upon you and remain with you always

Our service has ended.
Go in peace to love and serve the Lord

In the name of Christ

**The Lord bless you and keep you – Batavia Madrigal Singers, Virtual
Choir, John Rutter**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akT32E83zjl>