

This is the time of year we invite people to estimate their financial contribution to the church for the coming year. The term we use in describing this activity is stewardship. That word stewardship tends to become associated with a financial pledge.

The concept of stewardship actually involves much more than that. It's actually a characterization of our relationship with God. A steward is a person who manages another's property or financial affairs. Therefore, at the heart of stewardship is the counter-cultural idea that everything with have belongs to God.

In Psalm 50:10-12, God speaks: “For every wild animal of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills.” That's a way of saying *all* the cattle belongs to God. God continues, “I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and all that is in it is mine.” I love that part! God shouldn't lack for anything, because everything belongs to God anyway.

In Leviticus, God reminds the Hebrew people to be careful about how they think about land ownership. God says, “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants.” Human beings make distinctions between those who have rights as citizens and those who don't. From God's perspective, we are all aliens occupying territory that does not belong to us.

Author, John Ortberg, has a book titled: *It All Goes Back in the Box*. He uses the image of a board game as a metaphor for life. When you finish a game of Monopoly, you don't get to keep that hotel you had on Boardwalk. You don't get to stuff your pockets with those \$500 bills you accumulated.

A similar thing happens in life. When we come to the end of our lives, nothing we acquired in this life goes with us. In a sense, it all goes back in the box. We are merely stewards or managers of our possessions, finances, skills, abilities, intellectual capacities, hopes, and dreams, all of which belong to God and are entrusted to us for the short expanse of our lives.

This idea that everything belongs to God is a focus of the prophet Haggai. As I mentioned, in 587 BC, Babylon conquered the nation of Israel and destroyed the temple in Jerusalem. The Babylonians deported many of the inhabitants of Jerusalem and forced them to live in exile in Babylon.

By 538 BC, the political situation changed and the exiles were allowed to return home. However, nearly 20 years had passed since they returned and the Temple was still in shambles. Apparently, some of the people were complaining and wondering what was taking so long to rebuild the Temple. They remembered the former temple in all its majesty and glory.

The word of the Lord comes to Haggai. The message is: Keep working. Do not fear. The Spirit of God is with you. Then, God says, "In a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all the nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts."

I think this is interesting, because God is saying the splendor and the glory of the Temple will be restored. Why? Because everything that's required to restore the Temple to its former glory already belongs to God. It should be easy. By this time, the people of every land should have willingly presented all that was required. However, in order to get the gold and the silver and whatever else, God has to shake the nations.

Now, I've done some apple picking in my day. Of course, ripe apples will drop from the tree, but apples that have been sitting on the ground for a while aren't always the best. If you want a lot of really good apples, you shake the tree. In order for God to get the gold and the silver, all of which belongs to God in the first place, God has to shake the nations.

Honestly, and I say this with love, sometimes it feels like we have to do some shaking around Stewardship Season. For years, I've been telling this story. The preacher is in the pulpit delivering a sermon. She says, "Let the church walk. One of the deacons, deacon Smith, from the front row, replies, "Amen, let it walk."

The preacher says, "Now, let the church run." "Amen," said deacon Smith, "Let it run." The preacher said, "Now, let the church fly!" Deacon Smith shouted, "Amen! Let it fly!" The preacher said, "Now, it's going to take money to let the church fly." Deacon Smith said, "Let it walk, Rev. Let it walk."

I know it's a big ask to invite you to consider that everything we have belongs to God and we are merely stewards of everything we possess. So, what is the benefit of thinking this way? How does it make our lives better? For one thing, we take better care of things that belong to someone else.

I can remember having my nephews in my car when they were young. It felt like such a huge responsibility. I drove that car as carefully as I possibly could. They're all grown up now, so I'm not careful with them anymore, but back then, my head was on a swivel. I drove way slower than I normally would.

Have you ever had someone else's kids in your car? You're careful with your own kids, of course. But you feel that extra responsibility when you have someone else's kids. I knew I had to return those two boys back to their mother in, as good, if not better condition than when I picked them up.

Many of you know I ride a motorcycle. I have a good friend who rides also. He has two motorcycles. Recently, he left one of them with me, because he wanted me to ride it and see how I like it. So, for the moment, I have two motorcycles in my garage.

I'll tell you what, I've been more careful with his bike than I ever was with my own. Why? Because I'm responsible for something that belongs to someone else. Caring for that which belongs to him is a way of caring for our friendship.

I think this is the key to stewardship. If we view everything we have as belonging to God, it makes everything we have sacred. Our time, talents, and treasure become precious. Returning them for God's work in the world, becomes a joy and a privilege.

In the time of the prophet Haggai, there was no shortage of resources to restore the Temple to its former glory. It was just that the people of all the nations hadn't brought them forward yet. The promise was that God would shake a few branches. God was going to shake some gold and silver loose. As a result, God said, "The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former."

So, don't be surprised if, at some point, you feel you're being shaken. Don't be surprised if your well-ordered life, suddenly becomes rattled. It may be that God needs something you have in your possession. God might be trying to shake something free. It might be financial resources, but it might be a skill or a passion. It might be time or attention.

What we have is precious, and it's meant to be shared.