**2 Corinthians 9:6-15**

6 The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.

 7 Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

 8 And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.

 9 As it is written, "He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever."

 10 He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.

 11 You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us;

 12 for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.

 13 Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others,

 14 while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you.

 15 Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

**Mark 10:17-31**

17 As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

 18 Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.

 19 You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'"

 20 He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth."

 21 Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

 22 When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

 23 Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"

 24 And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!

 25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

 26 They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?"

 27 Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

 28 Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you."

 29 Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news,

 30 who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age-- houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions-- and in the age to come eternal life.

 31 But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

**Sermon** Together we can make a difference
I broke my head this week to find a story to tell you that would link all of this neatly to the epistle or gospel lesson today. Truth is, I don’t have one – I’ve used them all. So, I figured I will just ask all of you for a story about someone who gave it all up to make a difference in the world. Anyone knows anyone like that? And remember, I already used mother Teresa.

Or I can tell you the story about the phone calls I get here at church – those who call about help with gas; or those who call for help with food for children; or those who call for help with rent; or then the ones who call me daily, because they are so down and out that they don’t know how to do it anymore – they were denied disability despite the fact they had a stroke; their three children were taken away; they could not afford the heat on the trailer anymore, which caused the hot water heater to freeze and burst, and also the water pipes, with water leaks everywhere, causing the trailer to turn into a wet cardboard box. I have been asked to take children from someone to keep them safe. And I can come up with a thousand reasons, including the legal ones why I cannot help. I wish I had someone else to sometimes answer the phone, so that I don’t have to deal with the guilt.

This stewardship thing is not easy for me to talk about, just as I am sure this is not easy for you to hear, and you are probably right now thinking that I don’t have to tell you all of this… we are not letting any of this happen. We are already doing everything we can; we are not perfect, and we are not Jesus. We do the best we can… And I agree – this church has and still is reaching out in so many ways. And today we are dedicating our pledges, and in church we don’t really want to talk about money either; especially me, since I am dependent on you for my salary, and Doug just told us two weeks ago how expensive a pastor is.

But stewardship is about more than money; it is about more than me, and honestly about more than all of us. It is about the ways that God calls us to live our life. It is about a theme in the Bible we can trace from Genesis to Revelation. It is a calling rooted in creation and influences the way you live your life for the glory of God.

In fact, this is just as hard as hearing this story in the Gospel lesson today. I believe this man comes to Jesus for a reason. He doesn’t feel quite right, and although he's kept all the commandments, he still experiences a certain *dis*ease. And so, just like everyone else who requests healing from Jesus kneels, so does he… almost as he knows he is in need of restoration.

The commandments Jesus names are the ones about living in community, not about grasping at some far-off concept of life after death. When Jesus was asked about eternal life, he responded by describing how to live now.  The young man said he had done all these things, and the text said that Jesus loved him. Nevertheless, I think there was a serious disconnect between Jesus’ definition of “obedience” and this man’s definition.  His view may have been more in line with the theology found in the book of Deuteronomy, which encouraged the idea that those who are godly are blessed with wealth, and those who are not blessed with wealth must not be godly.

Jesus challenged this simplistic equation by calling the man to sell all his possessions, which in his mind represented God’s blessings for his obedience, and give the money to the poor, who deserved their poverty due to a lack of obedience. But it was more than he could accept.  He simply could not do it.  Jesus called him to a higher level of obedience, and instead of rising to the challenge, he walked away grieving.

Jesus invites not just the rich man but all of us to imagine that we are, indeed, stewards of our wealth, charged to use all we have to best care for all the people God has given us as companions along the way. Jesus knows that there are few things more important for us to do than to share our abundance. From giving away winter clothes to giving money to make sure fewer people go to bed hungry, each time we share what we have with others we are blessed as much or more as the recipient of our care. Jesus doesn't command him to give away what he has in order to cause him grief or to test him, but rather out of love; out of eucharisteo. And, whether you suddenly hear this as good news or bad, he loves us just as much.

The story is frustratingly ambiguous and rather ambivalent which tempts us to reduce this text to a message that is far too simplistic, but theologically easy. But what if we do take Jesus literally. We *do* have too much. We need to give it away. We have not given out of our abundance. And yet, just like Peter, we like to say: “Look, Lord, we have left everything and followed you”. Do you hear it? Exasperation, frustration, disbelief. We have left everything and followed you. My wife is living with my mother in law, nothing good every came of that, my boat is in dry-dock, my feet are tired, I’m hungry, I don’t know from day to day where I’m going to sleep, all these different homes and different meals are wreaking havoc on my gut, the children are screaming, I forgot to go to the store for supper, and all we have are Eggo waffles and tuna. Look Lord, I need a little more from you than tirade about rich people and the kingdom of God. What about you? Do the demands of discipleship seem sometimes never to stop?

The Bible says, "God has created us for a life of good deeds, which he has already prepared for us to do". These "good deeds" are your service to the world. Whenever you serve others in any way, you are actually serving God and fulfilling one of your purposes. God is at work in your life and around the world, and you have the privilege of participating in his work.

And without sounding too cynical or pessimistic, it seems to me that I’ve found this idea almost harder and harder to believe. There are more jobs, but less of them full time, or earning a wage that you can live on. Seems like rent and housing costs are too high to afford. More and more vets seem to find themselves on the street, and teen suicide is at an all-time high. Governments seem more interested in maintaining their majorities than improving the lives of the excluded and the down and out. And, of course, there’s the ever-looming and growing threat of climate change. Regardless of the cause or the circumstances—many of us have this deep sense of pessimism at our ability to change things for the better. For us it’s hard to see how one person can make a difference. No matter how thoughtful, no matter how committed, how thankful. Because it’s just all seems so beyond our control.

The great American writer and anthropologist Margaret Mead is well known for a particular saying. “Never doubt,” wrote Mead. “that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.” This is a reminder that individuals, and small groups of individuals can still make a difference; that as stewards, together with God, we can make a difference.

Rates of child mortality and extreme global poverty have dropped by 50% since 1990 because people have gotten involved and loved the world enough to do something about it. We’re on track to end child mortality and extreme global poverty by 2030 - if we make the effort. If we give, if we work, if we sacrifice, if we act as though the wellbeing of our fellow human beings depends on us (because it so often does!)

God’s gift of salvation can actually free us to do something: to love each other, to care for God’s people and world, to share the good news…right here, right now, wherever it may be that God has placed us. But living eucharisteo is hard. Deep down we’re too scared to do that for long, too scared and insecure and judgmental…and so many other things to boot. I mean, I still don’t feel like giving up all I have, and for me that is my biggest faith struggle. The extra room in the house that is empty… the food in the refrigerator and pantry for weeks to come… the little money I send to World Hunger Appeal to help those starving kids in Yemen… the hollow prayers for those who are marching to the border.

But just in case you thought stewardship is only about money… Stop there. It’s about time and caring for the environment and minimizing the practice of taking more than our share. It is about giving our lives to follow the steward who taught us about stewardship. It is to follow him who reached out to persons on the fringes of society-the poor, the sick, the woman, the outcast-to care for all members of the household of God. He used the gifts that God entrusted to him to teach, preach, and heal. He pointed others to the kingdom of God as a trustworthy steward of God's mysteries.

Every act of kindness, forgiveness, and reconciliation is worthwhile. Every minute we spend listening to and caring for somebody in despair matters, even when we don’t see it. Every dollar we give away instead of keeping is an assault on the powers of callousness and greed. And every protest against injustice and oppression will echo through eternity.

We may not change the world. But our job isn’t to change the world anyway. We can be part of God’s kingdom by being faithful right here and now. We can work to make a difference. The outcome… belongs to God.