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# Stewardship as Storytelling

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**I**t was a cold winter evening in my little hometown. I was home for Christmas break from college and my uncle's band was playing at a local bar. My parents invited me to join them. As you do at "townie bars," I was catching up with old friends when I realized I had not seen my dad for a while. As I scanned the room I spotted him at the end of the bar talking to a man I did not recognize. I asked my mom who the gentleman was. She answered by telling me the man's name, followed by "He's unfortunately known as the town drunk. I think he's here a lot."

I stood there watching my dad and this man interact. They were chatting, laughing, carrying on, and clearly enjoying the company of one another. Their conversation made an impression on me, and I felt proud. No one else had bothered to approach this fellow patron. No one sought to involve him in the larger group, the music, or the holiday cheer of the moment.

You see, my dad is a "small town guy" and a "simple man" as he describes himself. My parents live in the same Midwestern hamlet where he grew up working in the family hardware store. My grandparents cared deeply for their customers over the years and my dad grew up witnessing this generosity first hand. It was not uncommon for my Grandpa Owen to set up a payment plan with someone, only to forgive the remaining debt when he learned the gentleman could not afford it. Some might call that bad business, but for my grandpa it was doing the right and generous thing. Not surprisingly, my grandparents instilled this same graciousness in their children.

In the dark corner of a local watering hole, I witnessed my dad share the same compassion he had seen modeled by his parents. He had not given a second thought to his actions. In his mind that is just what you do. It was an act of love and generosity, sharing his time and his presence. He was living out his stewardship story without even knowing it.

This story not only defines who my father is to me, it has deeply shaped how I understand Christian stewardship. It is a story I love to tell, and every time I do the image of my dad and this man lodges a little deeper within me. His stewardship story has influenced my stewardship story.

Something happens inside of us when we tell our stories of generosity! For both the teller and the hearer. We often cannot help but be moved by the story, the image, and the feelings that rise up inside of us. In my relatively short ministry tenure, I have experienced Christian stewardship most poignantly through sto-

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rytelling. Telling God's story of generosity, as we tell our stories of generosity. This generosity is experienced through financial giving, but also in how we share our time, energy, sweat, and talents with others.

As the title of this article states, I have come to see "stewardship as storytelling" in three movements, or steps. First, we as leaders start with our own stewardship story. Second, we are encouraged to listen and attend to the stewardship stories of others. The third step is to invite others, particularly our congregants, to articulate, claim, and share their stories of generosity with the rest of God's kingdom. Through each of these steps we grow in our appreciation for God's abundance in our lives and, like the gospel, our stories keep rippling far beyond the original teller.

## Step one: Knowing my stewardship story

Numerous studies have shown the positive effects of lifelong giving for both the recipient and the giver. When we give we are ultimately connected to the recipient of that gift in ways more powerful than we might realize. In a study for the Proceedings of the National Academy of Science, James Fowler and Nicholas Christakis studied the effects that giving has on the immediate recipient, and on those who come after.<sup>1</sup> They did this by giving participants tokens that represented a certain monetary amount. Through a series of opportunities, participants were invited to share those with others in the experiment—sometimes with strangers, other times with people they knew.

The researchers found that people often mimicked the behav-

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1. Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler. "Cooperative Behavior Cascades in Human Social Network," in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* 107, no. 12 (March 23, 2010): <http://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0913149107>

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iors they witnessed, which led to positive behaviors that spread far beyond themselves. Their finding is that generosity spreads by three degrees—from person to person to person to person. In other words, when one person stewards gifts generously, it inspires others in a domino effect. They write, “each person in a network can influence dozens or even hundreds of people, some of whom he or she does not know and has not met.”<sup>2</sup> If this can happen when we observe the generosity of people we do not know, imagine how much more we are influenced by witnessing the generosity of those we do know!

This study illustrates why seeing my dad converse with the “town drunk” was so powerful for me. The same spirit of generosity he learned from his parents influenced how he treats others, and ultimately how I have been encouraged to do the same. When we witness someone act in compassionate ways or hear stories of how someone lived a life of stewardship, we too are impacted by their generosity. A narrative is created, and a story is written.

As a pastor, if I want congregants to explore their stewardship story, I must start with my own. I need to know the origins of my own understanding of stewardship before I can expect others to begin naming theirs. Where have I seen it modeled? Who taught me? What images and stories sum up my experience of generosity? What comes to mind?

I ask the same question of you. Who taught you about stewardship? Who has modeled the Christian faith through committed generosity? I am going to guess that the person you name taught you about stewardship of money, as well as time and talents. I am also going to guess that you carry their words and wisdom with you as you make important decisions about life, finances, relationships, and faith.

Who is this person for you? And who else in your life, because of this person, are you for? We cannot forget that others are watching our actions and listening to our words. I often consider just how my husband and I are teaching our children about the importance of giving. How do I demonstrate generosity from a place of abundance rather than scarcity? How do we love and give because God first loved us and gave us life?

My grandmother Kate died when my father was a teenager. I never had the chance to know her personally, but the stories others have told about her generous spirit have touched me deeply. These stories have encouraged my actions of love and generosity for others. I trust that this does not stop with me, that perhaps the stewardship story that I am living and exhibiting will influence someone else down the road. Our stewardship stories extend

far beyond ourselves, like a gospel story not easily forgotten and impossible not to share.

### Step two: Listening to the stories of others

The Christian church got its start by telling the Gospel, stories that were told orally long before they were written down. We are a product of God’s great story fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We cannot escape it; the story is in and with us always.

In the 1980s, my mother-in-law founded Sister Parish, a non-profit organization that partners North American churches with Central American congregations in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. On one of her first trips she and my father-in-law visited an older woman from a local Guatemalan parish. They were invited into her home, where they shared conversation over a simple meal. When my mother-in-law asked the woman, through broken Spanish, where she learned such hospitality, the woman answered, “You don’t just read the Bible, you act it out.” My mother-in-law is an incredibly generous woman, and she credits the people of Guatemala for teaching generosity to her in extraordinary ways. She once commented, “I don’t know if I would have learned such faithful stewardship any other way. The Guatemalans were scripture for me.”

As a newly ordained pastor at Bread of Life Lutheran Church, I did not think I knew anything about stewardship. As it turns out, I did—but not because I had book knowledge or took copious notes in my Church Administration and Finance classes in seminary. I knew about stewardship because, like my mother-in-law, I was willing to listen to people and their stories. I knew I had a lot to learn from them! What started as pastoral listening quickly morphed into a holy experiment, where I was the learner and they were the teachers. It was my job to help give them language when they did not have it, and to help congregants articulate where God was already writing stewardship stories through their witness of faith.

Sandy is an active member at Bread of Life who recently retired from nursing. Knowing that she desired “something more” in her life, I approached her about coordinating our home communion program, in which members take the sacrament from Sunday Eucharist to our shut-in members. One afternoon I had the good pleasure of accompanying Sandy as she visited a man who had just entered a memory care facility. The conversation was repetitive, sometimes going in circles, and it was holy. Sandy took the lead, while I sat back, watched, and listened. As we left I thanked her for sharing her gifts of time and presence with Virgil. In stewarding her gifts, Sandy advocates for our elderly members from a medical background. She breaks bread with them. She listens to their stories, affirms their joys and struggles, and loves them with all that she is. That afternoon my role was to watch and listen, to witness God at work in the story unfolding before me.

In my seven years of ordained ministry, I can honestly say that everything I know about being a pastor, I have learned from the people I serve. They have taught me so much about generosity, and many of their words linger in my ears. Tom, for example, insists:

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2. Ibid.

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“I have never been able to out give God;” or Deidre, who did not grow up in the church, once commented: “It is this congregation that has taught me what it means to be generous.” These are the stories of God’s faithful people! Many of them already are sharing generously their time, talents, and treasures in the kingdom of God. As leaders, it is our job to listen for the stories of generosity that people are already living and to help them claim these sacred moments as Christian stewardship.

**Step three: Encouraging others to tell the story!**

The story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 is a powerful illustration of stewardship storytelling. When Philip comes upon the man and his chariot, he overhears the eunuch reading aloud from the book of Isaiah. Philip asks him, “Do you understand what you are reading?” The eunuch replies, “How can I, unless someone guides me?”<sup>3</sup> Philip responds by stepping into the chariot, into the eunuch’s story and space, and shares with him about Jesus. The Ethiopian man is changed by this interaction. It leads to his conversion and to him rejoicing!

I would love to have met that elated Ethiopian on the road after his baptism! I can only imagine how excited he was to share his story, and the story of Christ. This is what happens when we are so moved by an act of generosity that we want to share the good news and share the same generosity shown to us. We cannot help but tell the story.

Angie did not think she had gifts for stewardship. She strove to be generous and share what she had with others. She and her husband, Shannon, worked hard to instill the values of kindness and compassion in their children. But she would not have considered herself a steward. That felt like too significant a title.

When I asked Angie to participate in our “Giving Generously” video series for our annual stewardship program, she was shocked. She doubted she had anything important to say. She doubted that she had a story to tell. Thankfully, she agreed anyway.

In that eventual video I asked Angie who taught her about the importance of giving. Through broken voice and creeping tears, she talked about her late mother, Alice, who had died suddenly when Angie was a young mother herself.

The most generous person I can point to would be my mom... I remember one example being when my friend lost a baby and everyone was doing something right away and she said: “I’m not going to do something for a couple months. Because a couple months from now they are going to be back to their normal lives and she’s not going to be.” That’s just the kind of person she was.

When we showed the video of Angie and her family in worship, there was a resounding applause at its finish. People approached Angie afterwards, thanking her for telling her story and for her willingness to talk about her mom, even though it was difficult. I showed this same video a few months later at a synod event focused on stewardship. As I turned to continue my presentation, I faced more tear-filled eyes in front of me.

Angie’s story held power for those who heard it. She did not think she had anything to add to the conversation, but it turns out she did. In telling the stewardship story of her mother and how her mom had shared her time and presence with a struggling friend, Angie was telling her own story of generosity.

To help people recognize their capacity to give, they must first be encouraged to know their own stewardship story, and then to begin articulating how God has been at work in their lives as they move to sharing their story with others. At Bread of Life we have tried various ways of encouraging people to share their stewardship story. One example is the video series in which Angie participated. We highlighted her family, as well as an elderly couple who are charter members of the congregation. Two families from two different generations, yet both were sharing abundantly with God’s church. Perhaps one of the coolest parts of this project was the involvement of confirmation youth who helped me create the videos. Jayde did all of the taping and editing out of the goodness of his heart. It was another act of stewardship in sharing his time and talents with our ministry.

A few years ago, our congregation celebrated twenty-five years of ministry. One Sunday I stood in front of the church and asked for \$500 for a special project I had in mind for the kids. After worship people filled my hands generously on their way out the door. The following Sunday during the children’s sermon, I handed out envelopes stuffed with \$25 to each kid. They had one

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3. Michael Coogan, ed. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2001).

direction: they had to spend the money on someone else! They were instructed to come back two weeks later and share with the congregation what they did and bring a picture to illustrate. I was moved by the generosity and creativity of these kids! One donated to the local animal shelter. Another purchased supplies to make friendship bracelets with differently-abled adults at a local day program. One young boy, being adopted himself, doubled the money with the help of his mom and sponsored medical supplies for an orphaned child in China, his country of origin. These children experienced the joy of giving and were excited to come back and tell the story!

In addition to these creative ways of telling the story, we hear members regularly share their understandings of stewardship, vocation, and faith through “mission moments” during worship. We have welcomed lay leaders from other congregations to share about their experiences of stewardship and mission. We have heard from confirmation youth who made a video detailing the financial needs of a local domestic violence crisis center, and the youths’ personal invitation for the congregation to give generously to this cause. We have heard people share God’s story by sharing their story. I believe each of us at Bread of Life has been touched by what we have seen and heard. In all of it, people have had a chance to explore how God is at work in their own stewardship story.

## Closing

Once a group of us from Bread of Life were visiting another congregation in a partnering synod. We had traveled there to observe their faith formation program, as we were thinking about making some changes to our own. During worship when it came time for the offering, the daughter of one of my travel companions dug into her mom’s purse and started making her way down the crowded pew to the aisle, her hands cupping a heap of loose change. When she finally reached the aisle, she stopped and looked around, only to realize there were no other kids exiting their pews with hands stuffed full of money.

You see, at Bread of Life we have a noisy offering every week. This is what Brynn was used to. Kids bring their loose change or wads of dollar bills to the front of the church and deposit it in the special offering “thing” each week. Sometimes it is a big piggy bank for ELCA World Hunger, or a large cardboard cutout of a church for our building addition, or the little plastic slide on which they slid down their noisy offering, landing in a metal bucket below. This was to raise money for a community playground we were building on our property at the time. It is fun for the kids and it is fun for the congregation, and clearly Brynn missed it when she realized not every congregation does this.

The look on her face was utter disappointment; her 3-year-old frown forever is etched in my memory. She wanted to give! She was learning the story of Jesus and his ministry; she was being brought up in the faith and learning the importance of generosity; she had an honest desire to share what she had with others.

This small moment, while not one Brynn will probably remember, is a part of her budding stewardship story. It is also part

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of my stewardship story, for I saw in the face of a child the power of generosity and the power of faith in Jesus Christ.

As leaders in the church, we have been called to know our stewardship story, so that we can share it authentically with God’s people. We are called to listen to God’s people, to hear and see where in their lives they are already giving their time, spiritual gifts, and money in Christian stewardship for their neighbor. As people of faith, we are commissioned to go and tell of the abundant love of Christ, to make disciples—stewards—of others. In doing so, we invite people to share their stewardship stories boldly and with deep appreciation for all that is God’s in their lives, which we know is everything! We must know our story, listen for the stories of others, and then send out the masses to share their stewardship story with the world.

I would not be who I am without the countless stewards who have taught, modeled, and lived generosity for me. I assume the same is true for you who read this. Christian stewardship is about sharing our time, talents, and treasures with God’s church. Ultimately, however, it is about sharing our faith, a faith that is steeped in God’s story of Jesus Christ, a story of love, compassion, and generosity for those in need. God’s story is alive and well in us! So, tell your stewardship story and help others to tell theirs. Generosity in the name of Christ will continue to ripple; it already is in motion and you are living proof.

## For Discussion:

1. Who has taught you about generosity and giving?
2. How has their example led you to share abundantly with others?
3. What do you hope others will learn from your actions of stewardship?