

STEWARDSHIP IN FAMILIES

by Marilyn Sharpe

Even more powerful than what adults say is what adults do.

From my earliest memory, I remember my parents talking about giving back some of God's abundant gifts. I recall conversations about giving through offerings to our congregation, through charitable gifts to help others in our community and around the world, and through spending time and talents to make the world a better place for all of God's children. Actually, what I remember best and most fondly is that my parents lived their words. I learned from them that stewardship is bigger than the change we put in our offering envelopes. It's broader than money. It's a way of viewing our relationship with God. God is inviting us to be caretakers of the creation, to care for one another, to celebrate God's boundless generosity with us by sharing with others. Yes, my parents gave money to our church, but they also supported missionaries in Africa and relatives in Sweden. They taught Sunday school, ushered, served on church committees, and provided congregational leadership. They led Girl Scout and Boy Scout troops. They served on the PTA and the school board. They helped neighbors who needed support or solace. My parents were wonderful stewards – and wonderful teachers.

Why Is Stewardship Important?

Stewardship, at its best, is about gospel, not law. We don't give because we've got to, but because we get to. We live a loving, giving, thankful response to God's love for us.

But stewardship is not programmed into us – and our culture of me-first materialism certainly does not teach it as an important value. We need to be taught to be grateful and to live generously. If we aren't taught to share the gifts we have been given,

we assume that we received the gifts because we deserved them – that they are ours, intended for our amusement, comfort, and smugness. We disconnect from the family of God. And we disconnect from God.

Marian Wright Edelman, founder and president of the Children's Defense Fund, writes eloquently of what her parents, who were poor, taught her about stewardship. In *The Measure of Our Success*, she writes, "We learned that service is the rent we pay for living. It is the very purpose of life and not something you do in your spare time."

Whose Job Is It, Anyway?

So, who will teach about stewardship? Why can't the church just do it? After all, isn't the church the repository of moral and ethical teaching? Isn't that what we pay clergy to do? After all, parents plead, we're not seminary trained and we're awfully busy.

Well, the church can and should teach about stewardship to all of God's children at every age and stage. The church can stretch one's understanding beyond the yearly pledge drive – beyond the idea that I give some of *my* money and *my* time and *my* gifts – to sharing the abundance of what God has showered on me.

But then there is that troublesome text in Deuteronomy, corroborated by research, that proclaims that teaching faith and values is most effective when done in the home, supported by the same message in the congregation. In fact, Deuteronomy is very clear about where the responsibility lies:

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away. . . ." (Deut 6:4-8).

In other words, parents are called to weave faith talk into the whole fabric of their daily lives with their families.

How Do Adults Guide Young Stewards?

- **Talk about it.** Begin by teaching children (and reminding adults) that everything we have – time, talents, treasure – is a gift from God, intended to be shared with the entire family of God. Teach the distinction between possessing and being stewards. Tell kids about why we give and what we give and to whom we give. This needs to be part of the faith talk as families. The word "stewardship" needs to be one that children hear adults in church and at home use and explain.
- **Model it.** Even more powerful than what adults say is what adults do. If there is a discrepancy, children will believe what we do over what we say. So, adults – parents, uncles, aunts, and grandparents – for heaven's sake, don't do stewardship in secret or after the kids are in bed or when they aren't around. Model generosity, concern for others, empathy, and altruism. Show them what you do. Let them do it with you. Let young people see themselves as stewards.
- **Express concern about examples of poor stewardship.** When we see examples of poor stewardship in our news media, our neighborhoods, our families, and our government, we need to identify the

problem, generate solutions, and get to work. We need to include children in both words and actions.

- **Resolve and commit to be good stewards.** Encourage and support children to share what they have. Families, decide on very specific things you will do to be good stewards. Serve others as a family unit. Check in as a family to monitor progress on goals and projects. Invite others to join you.
- **Catch young people being good stewards.** Be vigilant to catch young people – those in your family and those in your congregation and neighborhood – doing things right. Catch them being good stewards. Catch kids being generous, empathic, and altruistic. Remind them of times they've been good stewards. Predict that they'll soon be good stewards.

What My Children Have Taught Me: First Fruits, Not Leftovers

(Jesus) said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 18:3-4).

We are to learn from children, not just teach them! So, really, what do they have to teach us? Let me illustrate with three lessons my children taught me when they were young.

Alison and the Madame Alexander doll. When Alison was 4, my mother gave her a Madame Alexander doll, dressed in a froth of pink with a head of blond, curly hair, just like my daughter's. When Alison was 4½, my mother died. The doll was expensive, but its real value was as a reminder of a precious relationship. When Alison was 6, Les and I asked our children to sort through their toys, selecting some in good condition to give to Pastor Scott, whose ministry is to the impoverished in the inner city. He would give them to children who otherwise might not

have a gift at Christmas. Alison came out of her room beaming and bearing her Madame Alexander doll. “No,” I thought, “not that toy!” Alison persisted. “This is what a girl who only gets one toy would want.” And Alison was right and I was wrong. She taught me to give the good stuff.

Dumpster diving with Kathryn.

By age 11, Kathryn was already our own eco-warrior. She cared for the earth in careful consumption, in rigorous recycling, in picking up trash after others. One July 5, we were at a beach where trash overflowed the dumpsters, replete with countless aluminum cans. Kathryn was horrified. Les and I were, too. But Kathryn asked, “What can we do?” (Les and I were just thinking of a judgmental pronouncement on the slob that would trash a non-renewable resource.) Minutes later we all three found ourselves filling giant trash bags with disgustingly sticky, greasy aluminum cans which we would take home, wash, and recycle. And Kathryn was right and we were wrong. She taught us to care for the creation, even when it wasn't clean and easy.

Jonathan and the man at the door. When Jonathan was 8 and in love with money, he hoarded his cash

and dreamt big dreams. One dusky evening, a stranger rang our doorbell and I answered. “Lady, can you spare some cash?” he implored. I mutely shook my head and closed the door, angry and embarrassed that a panhandler was working our neighborhood. Jonathan came running, asking who was at the door. “A homeless man was begging for money, Jon,” I replied. Silently, Jon went to his room, got his stash of cash and ran to catch the man. And Jonathan was right and I was wrong. He taught me to give and give generously, not dependent on being worthy, because God has given abundantly to us, regardless of our worth.

So, adults of faith, be prepared to be good stewards of these incredible children in our midst. Let us be humble learners as well as teachers. Let us let children teach us to give first fruits, not just leftovers.

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