



The Power of Thank You

As the summer months play out there will be more than one pastor and chair of stewardship committees around the Synod already giving thought to what it is they will be doing for stewardship this coming fall. More often than not, this is a quest for the right program that will produce the most bang for the buck. From a pragmatic standpoint, this means that the pledges made will enable the local congregation to cover the expenses of doing ministry in the coming year. The process has been repeated over and over in congregations large and small, rural and suburban year after year. Every year the secret prayer of the pastor and committee chair is that somewhere they will discover the magic bullet and finally solve all the stewardship challenges that the congregation faces.

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Utopian Quests, Silver Bullets and Solid Theology

This is a utopian quest. No matter what the publishing houses and stewardship advisers will tell you, there are no silver bullet programs in publication that will turn stingy, unfaithful stewards into ragingly generous stewards in the course of one, two or three short weeks. This is not to say that there are not good programs available to the local congregation. Consecrated Stewards, a product of the Lutheran Church Extension Fund has a fine track record of results in congregations across Synod. There are any number of other resources out there from solid Lutheran organizations that can give you a system that can be used easily in the fall stewardship emphasis that will produce some of what can best be termed technical changes in the stewardship of the congregation.

But these technical changes are more like training a pet rather than changing hearts. Yes, these programs may end up with more dollars in the offering plates. But what can't be seen is the heart of the individual steward. Has the change been worked in such a way that the steward sees their giving and service as a response to God's generosity toward them or are they just giving more and serving more because they like the pastor or just want to hush him up about money for a few more months? In technical change, you can't tell the difference!

Changing Hearts from Self-centered to Steward-centered

If this is the case, how can the local congregation really foster adaptive change, that is change at the heart level of the individual stewards? Therein lies the rub for pastor and stewardship leaders in the congregation. No one can see the heart of the individual steward. We are left only to view the external signs of the steward. But there is one way that stewardship leaders can greatly increase the likelihood that the stewardship change in the congregation is much more adaptive than technical. This is to make sure that the focus of the stewardship efforts in the congregation, not just in the fall but all year, are firmly rooted in God's Word and the connection between baptismal font, altar, pulpit and that stewardship is highlighted as front and center!

Only the Holy Spirit can really change the hearts of stewards from self-centered to steward-centered. This theological approach makes stewardship not a human decision

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about what is done with owned resources, but rather a response in thanksgiving to the radical generosity of God, the owner of all things, toward stewards that are all together selfish and sinful. Charts and stair steps may be useful tools that will lead people to give more, but they are simply mechanics. If the means of grace, where the Holy Spirit has promised to work, are not the center of your stewardship efforts this or any year, the effort will fade and fail.

About Thanking Not Asking

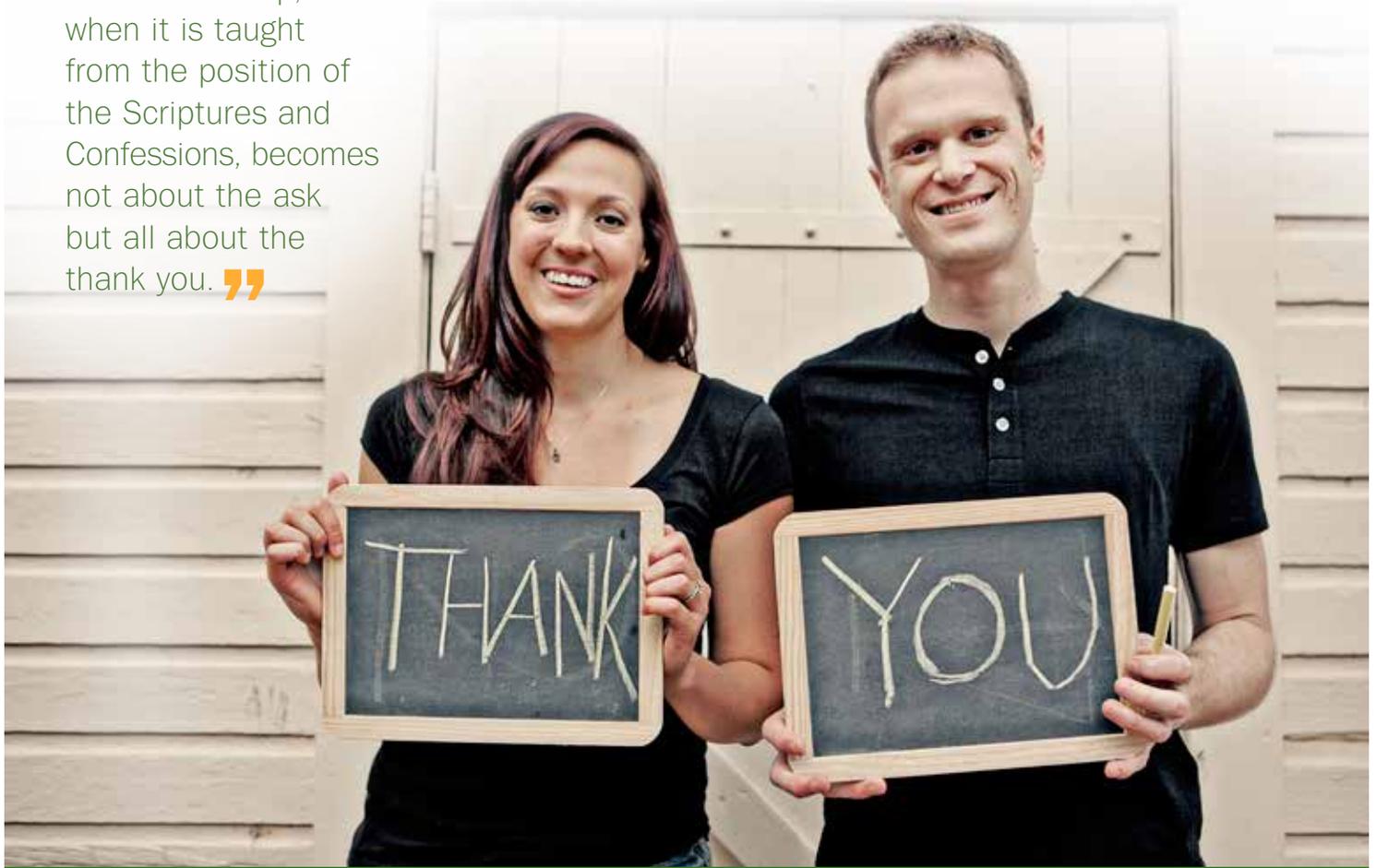
Stewardship, when it is taught from the position of the Scriptures and Confessions, becomes not about the ask but all about the thank you. Rom. 12:1 highlights the position of the faithful steward well when St. Paul writes: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” The mercies of God are the source and focal point of any worship that we fallen, yet redeemed sinner-stewards are able to offer. We first receive the mercies. Then and only then can we ever give anything in response. The more that we

highlight the mercies of God to the ones who were created by God and baptized into Christ as receivers of that mercy, the more likely we are to see hearts that are no longer conformed to the world, but transformed in such a way that the Lord can and will use them for the building up of the kingdom of God!

The stewardship that is taught in the local congregation needs to tap into the power of thank you. First, it must connect the individual steward to a pattern of thanksgiving with all of their life and life's resources. Teaching stewardship from the position of obligation will bring about grudging results. Stewardship teaching that flows from thanksgiving to God will produce a bumper crop in the hearts and lives to God's people. But this is not to the credit of those who teach. It is solely the credit of the Holy Spirit at work through Word and Sacrament ministry in the lives of those who have been called to be stewards.

The Power of Thank You

This teaching of stewardship is organic. It is not really theoretical. The teaching of time, talents, treasures and even tithes



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are theoretical. The only real way for stewardship to truly tap into the power of thank you is for it to be modeled. This means pastors and stewardship leaders need to first and foremost live their lives as thankful stewards of all of God’s resources. Spend as much time in your stewardship meetings talking about showing thanksgiving to God for all of His good gifts as you do about planning the efforts and looking at the charts! When leaders lead with their lives of thankful stewardship, it becomes contagious within the congregation.

Another way to tap into the power of thank you is for the congregation to actually say thank you. Parents remember well the constant need to teach their children to say thank you. How many times does a parent have to prompt a child after something has been given to them, “now what do you say to Grandma who gave you that tasty cookie?” There is a reason for that! We are by nature sinful and selfish. The only way that a child will even consider saying thank you rather than gimme dat! is if thanksgiving is modeled.

Modeling Stewardship

Modeling a stewardship tapped into the power of thanksgiving is critical if the local congregation wants to grow stewardship that is focused on the mercies of God. In your plans for stewardship, how will the congregation say thank you for those who have been led by God to be faithful

and generous stewards for the sake of the kingdom? In some congregations, the pastor writes a letter of thanks which accompanies the quarterly contribution statements that are mailed to each household in the congregation. In other congregations, the pastor uses the time during the gathering of the offering once a month to say thanks for the generous stewardship that has allowed for certain aspects of ministry in the congregation. Hand written thank you notes are always great ways to acknowledge special and larger gifts of resources and service.

Now, understand that this power of thank you is not directed at the individual steward. It is written to them, but not directed to them. The tenor of thanks always points back to the ultimate giver, God Himself. But when the pastor and stewardship leaders tap into this power of thanks that flows from the mercies of God, great things happen. Stewards begin to look beyond what they are doing and begin to see what God is doing in and through them. This then frees them from fear of scarcity and opens up new realms of possibility.

Worth the Effort

So as local congregations start to plan for fall stewardship, it is critical that they answer this question: “How are we going to tap into the power of thank you this year?” The effort it will take to come to this answer and the effort to carry it out will indeed take time. But the results will be worth the effort!

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