

Amos 8:4-7
1 Timothy 2:1-7
Luke 16:1-13

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Humans are not the only clever animals on the planet. Chimps, for example, make tools and show the ability to plan ahead. We might consider the organization and communication skills of bees creating a hive, ants building a colony, geese flying in formation for best aerodynamics, fish and frogs burrowing down in mud to hibernate in surviving droughts, and how dogs and cats seem to have the ability to train their owners. In fact, other species appear to act at times at a level beyond what people sometimes demonstrate. Some dismiss this as animal instinct ... although it still points to God's wisdom of design.

This should give us pause to reflect on how well we use our God-given intelligence and abilities to become what we are created to be. Human beings have unique advantages and many more choices than most of our fellow creatures. Unfortunately, we tend to become self-serving instead of serving God's creation as good stewards. We sometimes expend the energy and resources we have on what does not matter and let go of what does matter.

Long before the networks brought us the survivor genre of television fare, Mark Twain offered an interesting scenario. He envisioned a world summit with each species on the planet having one representative. Twain then suggested that if there were a vote on which species could stay and which must go -- based on which one caused the most damage to the planet -- that humans would be voted off the planet on the first ballot.

One of our church members admits, when she gets disgusted with people, how she thinks God's Creation story in Genesis should have stopped with the animals. This first book in the Bible states how people are created in God's image, even though all fall short. In Scripture, both Psalm 8:5 and Hebrews 2:7 declare how God created humankind just a little lower than the angels. Romans 3:23 declares we have all sinned and fall short of the Glory of God. People try to discern who seems more saintly and who to deem as more sinful. If this inspires you to do your best in looking for good role models, go for it! Yet if it causes you to become judgmental and scornful toward others while dismissively justifying your own shortcomings, cut it out! Good stewardship always holds us accountable.

There's a favorite quote I googled, and was surprised to find it attributed to a number of people: Robert Louis Stevenson, Abraham Lincoln, James Truslow Adams, Edward Wallis Hoch, Edgar Cayce, and Bishop Fulton Sheen. "There is so much good in the worst of us, and so much bad in the best of us, that it hardly behooves any of us to find fault with the rest of us."

Perhaps with humility and humor, good stewards should confess, no matter what happens, how we can't take full credit or full blame. We are called to do our best, learning from our mistakes, striving to find redemption in painful crises, and bring healing to people's wounds. It's all the more challenging if we are dealing with our own guilt of blame.

Jesus tells an unusual parable about stewardship of a dishonest servant who had cheated both his employer and his master's debtors. He thought he was smart enough to not get caught, but as panic set in with his pending unemployment, he used his shrewd abilities for survival by manipulating the books to benefit the victims, hoping it would ultimately give him some credibility and a place to land. You would think this maneuver would get him in deeper hot water with his boss. The weird twist of the story is in how the master actually commends the shrewd tactics as cleverness, as if this servant manager had finally did something right for a change, establishing good will among clients, perhaps even saving his job.

I can't believe Jesus is advocating dishonesty or deceitful business practices. Maybe the good news is that any one of us can actually become God's blessing to others, in spite of our track record or personal failings. This servant had not benefited his employer or his clients ... until he was finally faced with his own accountability. Accountability might make us all shudder with apprehension, but it likely does bring out the best in us. The gifts, talents, resources, relationships and positions we have are not meant to be squandered on selfishness.

I'm reminded of another famous quote which is hard to attribute: "If you let money pile up, like manure, it starts to stink. But if you spread it around then it can do a lot of good, encouraging young things to grow."

Sources include Sir Francis Bacon, John Jacob Astor, Thornton Wilder, and the musical "Hello, Dolly."

Good stewards should provide for themselves and their families, as well as the needs of others in any community. What if all our enterprises honored God's desire to bless all of Creation? Well-run businesses keep both clients and employees happy; let alone generating enough revenue for solvency. The usual scenario demonstrates poor stewardship, graft, misplaced priorities, slush funds, personal gold parachutes, deceitful politics, and the abuse of victims and environment. Accountability always makes abusers panic. God can use such crises for good purposes ... and may bring out the best in the even the worst of us. It may surprise us who the Lord may use as His instruments to fulfill God's Will. What will be the stewardship criterion to discern such things? I ask you to ponder the Prayer of Saint Francis, which you will find inside your bulletin near the last page. His ministry and stewardship included the blessing of animals and care of nature, in addition to the well-being of the poor. I invite you to pray it with me now:

"Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy. O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen."