

# **Kingdom-Building Stewardship: 10 Years On**

## ***Preface:***

Well.

We are moving ahead in our survey of Smoky Row's core values. Last week we talked about our core value of "Prophetic Multiculturalism;" our commitment to being a multicultural church, which as a community prophetically speaks against the divisions between people that the world promotes. Instead, we speak about the world to come, where all tribes and tongues and nations worship the Lord together. I invited us to think about how we might live that out right now more fully than we have been able to, and again ask us not to allow COVID to derail our commitment to be who we say we are.

Today, we'll be talking about another core value of ours: Kingdom-building Stewardship. Just like our Multiculturalism is Prophetic, which means something, so our Stewardship is Kingdom-building. Adjectives matter when it comes to these Core Values. We'll highlight this description of our stewardship as we talk about this Core Value, of course. But first, let's pray:

## ***Prayer:***

**Briefly:**

Let's start by oh-so-briefly summarizing the main points from those passages that were read to us, because, you know...Scripture shapes us, and looking at the Bible with more than a passing glance can remind us of the ways we are out of shape with the life Jesus calls us to.

**Oh So Briefly: Matthew 25:14-30**

What I want us to notice most this morning in the passage that was read to us from Matthew is first the statement that each of the master's servants was given money "according to his ability." When the master returns and asks what's been done with his stuff by his servants, he isn't expecting the same of each of them, right? The master knows his servants, knows their ability. The limiting factor in their faithfulness wasn't what they had or didn't have; it was their willingness to live up to their abilities, their potential.

Again, the limiting factor in their faithfulness wasn't what they had or didn't have; it was their willingness to live up to their abilities, their potential. They should have been able to do the master's work with what they had; all their master asked of them was that they live up to the abilities he was aware of when he gave them the gold in the first place.

This is critical. We may none of us have very much; very

much time, talent, or treasure. But we have ability. And we have to fight against whatever inside us gets in the way of using what we have in the ways God wants us to. This is true whether it's fear--as in the case of this poor example of a servant--or insecurity, or forgetfulness, or low-self-esteem, or laziness, whatever--we've got to fight against it.

And the goal of these slaves isn't at all oriented toward themselves, either. The goal isn't that the servants get rich and be able to afford comfortable retirements, vacation homes, and some stuff to pass onto their children. The goal is faithfulness to the trust that the master puts in each of them. And the master rewards them by inviting these servants into his happiness, his pleasure; taking them from their powerlessness position to sharing in his power.

And it seems so rude that the master says that those who have nothing, it'll be taken from them, but we forget that in this parable, the word we translate servants is just as easily translated "slave." They don't own what they've been given charge of; they have no rights over it to do as they please. It's been lent to them explicitly so that they can make it larger for the master's purposes. It was not theirs to begin with.

And this is a parable, right? It's an illustrative story, which can inform our understanding of our relationship to God.

But we don't want to create "law" out of parables; we want to allow this parable to inform our relationship with what we have. And it can give rise to healthy questions:

Do we think of the stuff we have as "ours," or "God's?" What would God say about how faithfully we are living up to our abilities? Do we think we are the 5 bag, 2 bag, or 1 bag-of-gold-slaves? And do we think that if only we had more then we could really please God through our use of it? Just questions.

### ***Oh So Briefly: 2 Cor 9:6-15***

And the other passage, from 2 Corinthians? It's about a collection of funds Paul is taking up to provide for the Jerusalem congregation. And it's about cash, about congregational giving.

And one clear thing it can make us consider is just how rarely we "decide in our hearts," anything, much less what to give to the Church. Our usual default setting when it comes to our cash--because this is a passage about cash--both just generally as humans, and often as Christians--is self-protection and self-providence. But I know you all, and I know our collective generosity. I know that we are deciders, and we know that when something is an afterthought, or a spur of the moment decision, it is rarely a good thought or a great decision. So maybe there's just

not as much to say to us as there might be to others.

The Corinthian passage reminds us that our generosity positions us to receive more from God; but what we receive we don't receive for our own interests, but we receive it so that in any situation, no matter what comes up, we can give in the most appropriate way out of what we have.

The last part of this passage from Corinthians could have been written to Smoky Row. It should be an encouragement to us. I'll just read that part:

***“This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, people will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!”***

The cash we, Smoky Row, has given--and Paul is talking about money here, right--it has done good for both those who are not “ours” and those who are. So much good:

During COVID, so many people found relief and rest here, we were able to open our doors up for people who needed us. And we still open our doors for those who need us. Benevolences we give to people--alms--they are keeping people housed, keeping their utilities going. The groups and ministries we support locally, denominationally--my own paycheck--this is all great stuff. And we have, in our generosity, proven that we are changed by the gospel, that having confessed Christ as Lord and Savior, the way we think about and treat our money is different than the way those who don't follow Jesus relate to their cash. This is all true of us!

And we have been prayed for, people have thanked God for our partnership and our generosity. And every time someone says "God Bless You" to a member of Smoky Row because of what we as a church have done then we are all blessed. When Paul says, "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" He's not talking about the cash we've gotten; he's talking about the grace we've received, the ability to take part in God's work through our own responsive generosity. And as we have been able to be the hands and feet of the Lord, have been able to administer that grace of God to others, we know it feels good to be a blessing and to bless.

So this passage of Paul's can give rise to questions that we

should ask: Are we generous? Do we believe that a particular grace Christians receive is the grace of giving to others what they need? What does God think about our financial support of Smoky Row, of other groups and organizations and people?

And I have talked about these passages in very personal terms; asked us questions that are questions about each of us as individuals and households. But the core value we hold is one we hold as a community. So let's read that core value.

### ***Kingdom-building Stewardship: A Read Through***

***A. As Smoky Row Brethren Church, we recognize our responsibility to act as stewards of all that God has given us. The ultimate goal of our stewardship is to extend God's Kingdom (or reign) throughout creation. This concern for stewardship extends to all areas of our lives:***

***We attempt to wisely steward our gifts—those supernatural resources God gives to everyone who follows Jesus—as well as the skills, aptitudes, and talents that we have gained through our life experiences.***

***We consider our material possessions and financial resources as things that should be used in***

**light of God's concerns, and not just ours.**

**We attempt to wisely use the time we have, knowing that our lives are limited and we cannot add length to them (Matt 6:27).**

**Our stewardship concerns range from the seemingly insignificant—how we use the moments we have waiting in line at a grocery store or what we do with our pocket change—to the more significant—what vocation we choose or how we might tend creation itself. Such breadth and depth with regard to our stewardship makes sense for us in light of Paul's statement: "You were bought with a price, so glorify God in your body" (1 Cor 6:20). Further, we believe that the things we have control over in this life are not given simply for our pleasure but are lent to us for purposes that we often don't recognize if we focus on ourselves (Phil 2:4).**

**B. Importantly, our stewardship has as its main concern the promotion of God's Kingdom—or reign—throughout creation. This means that the values and principles that relate to our Kingdom-building stewardship are not based on our own wants and needs, or drawn from market economics, but are based on the values and principles of the Kingdom of God. We turn to scripture, one another, and the Holy Spirit in order to discern these principles as we strive to steward the assets that we have been**

***given. We do this both individually and corporately in our efforts to expand God's Kingdom.***

***We recognize that good stewards do not simply maintain what they have been charged to care for. Instead, they try to increase it, so that God can use it in Kingdom-building ways (Matt 25:14-30). Just as God's Kingdom is merciful, peaceable, and life-promoting, we want our stewardship to promote a more full and peaceful life for those we serve. We pray that they might choose to enter into God's loving Kingdom as we have. We are reminded that it is through our intentional actions on their behalf that we make "neighbors" of those who have been strangers to us (Luke 10:25-37).***

***Just as we try to thankfully and cheerfully receive what God entrusts to us, we strive to cheerfully and thankfully offer our lives and resources to God and others for the promotion of God's Kingdom (2 Cor 9:6-15).***

So. Our Core Value of Kingdom-building Stewardship. What is it saying to us? When it calls us into the best picture of ourselves, what does it call us to? Remind us of?

### ***KBS: Talent, Time, & Treasure:***

First of all, Kingdom Building Stewardship at Smoky Row reminds us that every single one of us has talents--skills

and Spiritual Gifts; has time-24 hours, for every day we've got, right?--some of us with more or less of it already called for by various things; and has treasure--our financial wealth or poverty or somewhere in between. We all have talents, time, and treasure.

We have them in different measure; of course--we are on spectrums when it comes to these things--but none of us has no none of these things. We all have them in some measure. If we think we have no time, no treasure, no talent, we are wrong. And, as we noticed earlier, what should occupy us isn't how "if we only had more we could do more," but what are we doing with what we do have.

And simply, straightforwardly, we are people who try to steward our time, treasure, and talents well, because we recognize that it's not our stuff, but God's. And because it's God's stuff, we aren't flippant or dismissive about how we use what we've got. We take seriously the choices that come one right after the other about what we'll do with these things.

This Core Value reminds us as members of Smoky Row to take a look at our calendars and our checkbooks, because they reveal to us more than anything else what we're doing with our time, our treasure, and our talents. And this is as true for the church, for us together, as it is for anyone of

us. What does the church's calendar tell us about where Smoky Row spends our time? What does the church's budget and books tell us about where we spend our treasure? And the reality is that our talents are all mixed up in these two areas.

Time, Treasure, and Talents: we've got to steward them well, because they are lent to us by God so that we might build God's Kingdom with them.

### ***KBS: Not Maintenance***

And that's important, that last bit.

Kingdom Building Stewardship reminds us that our goal is not to maintain what we have; but to make it even better. And not to make it even better for our own sake, but to make it even better so that God's Kingdom might be built ever larger.

This is part of the point of the parable of the talents--or bags of gold, if you're reading the translation we used today. The servant maintained what he was entrusted with...but that wasn't enough. If all we do is maintain our existence as a church--well, here's what happens.

Remember, first: We want people to come into the Kingdom of God, to become followers of Christ, to know

what we know, the gospel of peace and the promises of Jesus. We want people to come into God's Kingdom, and let God be King of their hearts and their lives. And we want to use what we have as a community to promote merciful, peaceable, life-promoting things--things that happen when people are fed and clothed, are healed and supported, are helped by any of us. This is good; and it's happening here, through us, praise God.

But when when a church slowly gives up building God's Kingdom, and instead, begins maintaining what exists, nursing itself, keeping itself alive, and meeting its own needs only, the church becomes not a place of mission, but a place of chaplaincy, a place of chaplaincy. And Chaplains are good, right? The ministry of chaplaincy is a ministry of support, of encouragement, of nurturing and most of all of presence.: it's important. But it is not the highest goal of a church.

And when a church gives up the difficult call of building God's Kingdom and trades it for the call of Chaplaincy it is only ever a matter of time before that church moves from chaplaincy into Hospice Care. Chaplaincy cannot keep a church growing and thriving; it is a group of ministries that taken together keep a church warm, nurtured, cared for--which is, like, part of what a congregation is meant to be, right?--but if that's all a church is about, it will die. It will

die.

And, look: By some miracle we have not just survived a time that has tested many congregations, but we have even--as Smoky Row, as a place where Kingdom-Building Stewardship is practiced--we have in some respects thrived. COVID has caused death in and the death of congregations; but we are here. We have survived a time when chaplaincy has been, for some, the only option, and only now are some congregations realizing they were in hospice care all along. And our place is not to boast, but to be grateful, and pray for those congregations we know, who, while they weren't looking for it, began to die. Our core value reminds us that we cannot, as Smoky Row Brethren Church, ever become maintainers only of what we have. We must use what we have to promote and build God's Kingdom, and make the best of it, the most of it.

### ***KBS: Immediate Relevance***

And while we have done this for some time now, and done it well, we must continue to hold to this core value of ours.

Here's the rub: Unless we give of our money to Smoky Row, this church cannot build God's Kingdom. Unless we give of our time to Smoky Row, this church cannot build God's Kingdom. Unless we give of our talents to Smoky Row, this church cannot build God's Kingdom. If we keep all our

talents and all our treasure and all our time for ourselves, we, Smoky Row, will wither up and die. If we use them only for the maintenance of what exists right now, then we, Smoky Row, will begin to chaplain ourselves down the road to death.

Just as during COVID we did more than embrace chaplaincy, we have to do that now. We have to hold the course in these things. We can't begin holding tightly to our treasure, even though we live in an anxious age. We can't keep back our time, even though we live in a period of re-examination. To do the things we are doing as the small church we are, we need the involvement of all of us, just all of us--and this holds true for the talents, the gifts, the skills, and the unique perspectives each of us brings to the Smoky Row table.

So of course I want to say to us: give more cash, give more time, use more talent here, because Smoky Row Brethren Church is embodying Christ in a way that is powerful to people, and edifying for the Kingdom of the King we serve. Do it not to maintain what we have but to make what we have better able to promote the Kingdom we are a part of. But guess what: a thousand, a million voices are right now, all the time, asking for these things for all sorts of reasons. And they ask more persuasively, and more loudly, and more constantly. So does it serve anyone for me to ask,

too, once in a while? I dunno.

What this comes down to, at the end of the day, is whether we believe in the most basic of ways, the most routine of ways, really--talent, treasure, and time--if we believe that Smoky Row is worth them. And because talent, and treasure, and time are such personal things: Do we believe that Smoky Row is worth us, and worth what we bring to our shared table, hoping God would feed both us and others with it?

### ***Our Church:***

The world calls us to hoard and self-protect; God calls us to see what we have as gifts given to bless others. The world calls us away from examining our relationship with our time, treasure, and talent and calls us to accept whatever flow we find ourselves caught up in. God calls us to “decide in our hearts” how we will live faithfully with whatever we have--no matter how much or how little it is, by the world’s count. When we reflect on where our time and treasure and talents are going, and we decide to shuffle some of them Smoky Row’s way, we are choosing to position this congregation for life, not death; to help Smoky Row continue to be a place where the needs of the Lord’s People, and those we pray become the Lord’s people after seeing God’s grace through us, are met.

***Conclusion:***

Kingdom-building Stewardship is our core value. It's more than maintenance; it's life-giving: for our congregational life, and for those who really need what Jesus offers them through this special church of ours.

Are we generous with what we've been given? Are we faithful with it? Are we living up to our abilities, or something less than them? And have we taken the time to decide in our hearts, with the Lord's grace, how best to use our time, treasure and talents?

I like chaplaincy; it makes a ton of sense during a global pandemic. But I pray it's never our destiny. I pray we never maintain ourselves into death, but that we are always growing, building God's Kingdom, and being as faithful as we can be with whatever has been given to us. I pray it for both our congregation, and each one of us. our church, and for each of us.