

**“Sharing Our Own Selves”**  
**(The *Dreaded* Stewardship Sermon)**

**1Thessalonians 2:1-8**

You yourselves know, brothers and sisters,  
that our coming to you was not in vain,  
but though we had already suffered  
and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know,  
we had courage in our God to declare to you  
the gospel of God in spite of great opposition.

For our appeal does not spring from deceit  
or impure motives or trickery,  
but just as we have been approved by God  
to be entrusted with the message of the gospel,  
even so we speak, not to please mortals,  
but to please God who tests our hearts.

As you know and as God is our witness,  
we never came with words of flattery  
or with a pretext for greed;  
nor did we seek praise from mortals,  
whether from you or from others,  
though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ.

But we were gentle among you,  
like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children.

So deeply do we care for you  
that we are determined to share with you  
not only the gospel of God but also our own selves,  
because you have become very dear to us.

## Sharing Our Own Selves

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

October 29, 2023

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### I.

For today's sermon, I would like to both begin and end in the very same place: this place, an *amazing* place, an on-going miracle which is occurring right here in the midst of us and under our very own noses; quietly, confidently, without much fuss or fanfare, which is slowly, surely, spreading out to touch lives, warm hearts, form faith, labor lovingly, forgive freely, and root ourselves ever more deeply into the fabric of our lives together such as to transform ourselves and, at the same time, to transform our community and our world. While there is much that happens in this place which is certainly mystical and slightly magical, there really is very little mystery to it: we are people who care so deeply for each other that we are determined to share not only the gospel of God, but to also be about the business of sharing our own selves. Amen.

### II.

What?!? Oh, *I* know, you are all thinking there *has* to be more to the story; or the sermon, at the very least. Am I right? You think this is some clever homiletical ploy. Sorry, not really, this is *it*.

Of course, there is *always* more to the story. The truth is, though, the "story," those things which happen in-between, after the beginning and before the ending, how we go from start to finish, is largely up to all of you. It is a story all of *you* get to dream up, and live out, and make real, and bring to fruition. Make no mistake about it, though, whatever story you *do* choose to write, and live, only ever arises as an *opportunity* and is in *no* way an obligation. It is a choice; which, in itself, is a big part of the story.

Still not convinced, huh? You think I am just giving you the business, is that it? Well, maybe I am; but it was only ever *your* business to begin with. I am not giving it to you, you are giving it to yourselves.

### III.

The fact is, a church *is* a business much like any other. We have bills to pay for heat, water, sewer, electricity, building maintenance, staff, program, insurance, trash, lawn, snow removal, supplies, you name it. All of which leads us right here to today, and the *dreaded* stewardship sermon.

This congregation has taught me a *great* many things these past 25 years. One of the most important is this: *we have to ask for what we need*. When we have the courage and honesty to do so, we almost always receive a stunningly gracious response, both from God and those around us, which is quite often *much* more than we dared to expect, and in a form we could have *rarely* anticipated. Given this, part of what today is about is asking for what our church needs to continue its work and mission for just one...more...year. The church needs our time, talent and treasure, in whatever amount and to whatever degree we are able, and feel moved to offer as gifts freely given.

### IV.

Now, when I refer to the stewardship sermon as “dreaded” you are all very aware (I hope) that I have tongue firmly in cheek. I am sure that a great many of us have some measure of fear or apprehension about “stewardship”; be it real or imagined. Perhaps owing to experiences, either in previous church settings or any number of other areas of life, when such appeals were perceived to spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, or with words of flattery, or with a pretext for greed, or in an effort to seek praise. All of which the Apostle Paul is well familiar, as these were the kinds of claims made against him by some in the church at Phillipi; which he is trying to address with the church at Thessalonica in today’s scripture reading from 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8.

### V.

Now, Paul is a cagey guy. He knows there are any number of very good reasons why first century believers in the early church should be encouraged to support the work of the Gospel in their church and their community. I know *he* knew these reasons because *I* am aware of them as well; at least as far as *this* church, *our* church, is concerned.

This church is a mechanism, a means, a method for interjecting good into our world; constantly reminding us that life is not a closed system. Moreover, we are a “force multiplier” *for* that good; here we move mighty mountains with mere mustard seeds.

This church is a place where potentiality transforms into actuality; where hopes and dreams are made real, lifted up, and given flight. Here, people are allowed the time, space, freedom, and opportunity to find their way back to themselves, and back to God; and offered the support along the way to do so.

## **VI.**

Borrowing a phrase from the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians, we are a community that builds up, rather than puffs up such that love is loosed upon the world in the succor we provide, the compassion we tender, and the haven of hospitality we offer. We *are* the port in the storm.

In terms of acting as an agent for social change and personal transformation, you simply will not find a bigger bang for your buck than investing in this congregation. We *are* the change we wish to see in the world.

In a divided and divisive nation we demonstrate the Psalmist words about how good and how pleasant it is when sisters & brothers dwell together in unity. We are what is possible in an improbable world. Here we listen such that others know that they have been heard. Here we abide each other such that no-one is made to journey alone. Here we seek to offer forgiveness such that we all might be accept the grace that God offers through Christ.

## **VII.**

That said, and while all of this is true, the Apostle Paul was well aware that *none* of these very good reasons to support the church mean *nearly* as much as the church we are creating for ourselves, *over the long haul*. Ours is a story writ largely through ordinary experience, shared sorrow, mutual endeavor, the regularity of rejoicing, hard questioning, deep faith, and an ever-growing sense of the *immense* grace God *relentlessly* bestows upon us each and every day. So deeply do we care for each other that we are determined to share not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because we have become very dear to each other; treating each other with gentleness, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children.

## VIII.

At the end of the day, and at the end of the dreaded stewardship sermon, we support the church because we have come to believe and to understand that in so doing, we are supporting those who have become *very dear* to us. This is an *amazing* place, an on-going miracle which is occurring right here in the midst of us and under our very own noses; quietly, confidently, without much fuss or fanfare, which is slowly, surely, spreading out by touching lives, warming hearts, forming faith, laboring lovingly, forgiving freely, and rooting ourselves ever more deeply into the fabric of our lives together.

In *sharing* our own selves with each other, we are also *transforming* our own selves; and the world right along with us. *That* is the business this church is in, and it has been given to all of us to manage, to sustain and, especially, to enjoy. Amen! (*I mean it this time!*)