

here? If we think we have struggles now.....imagine how it will be like a generation from now? Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

As we begin to discern our way forward into our next fifty years, this year we will have committee meetings and focus groups and information sessions. We will sit around in circles and TALK. We will pool our best wisdom. We will aspire to be faithful—indeed to be good stewards of the wealth of our master that has been placed in our trust. In our dialogue we will be thinking (naturally) about what we want, what we need, what we hope for. Every time we do this I hope to remember to put out an empty chair to remind us of the Varsity Acres people who aren't quite here yet, but who will feel the impact of our decisions and directions. With every imagined idea for our future we need to ask the kinds of questions we have already raised in these last few weeks. “Is this possible direction faithful to God’s callings to us the church?” “How do we nurture the kind of faith that will be resilient today and in the future?” “Even though this direction might seem like a burden, is it perhaps our cross to bear?” “If we pursue this imagined direction will that help us give a meaningful witness to Christ for those watching us?” Alongside each of these questions we need also to ask, “how will this serve the generation that follows us?” Indeed, we need to consider a fifth standalone question: “What can we do today for the sake of those who follow us? What change can we make now that will make their life a little easier...and more faithful?”

We are now the stewards of our master’s wealth. We’ve been entrusted with the faith, with the gospel, with this people of God! We are entrusted with God’s mission as co-workers with God. We’ve been entrusted with spiritual gifts, given by the Holy Spirit, that enable us to pursue God’s mission. Entrusted to us to be put to work, that us being the church will make that wealth more: turning 2 talents into 4, perhaps even turning 5 talents into 10! My hope for our church is to hear the master say to us “Well done, good and faithful steward! Enter into the joy of your master!” But I think there is one other thing we would like to hear. When Varsity Acres Church gathers for its 75 anniversary, for its 100 anniversary, they will look back upon us and say “Thank you. Thank you for the decisions you made in your time for our sake.” Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

## “Stewardship of the Future”

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Text: Matthew 25: 14-29

Rev. Peter Coutts

This is now week four in doing top level reflection on what the church is called to be in hopes of sparking our imaginations of who Varsity Acres Church might be as we enter the next 50 years of our history. By now you may be asking, “Why is this important to think about?” For me, the motivation to think about the future of the church and consider a reformation of the church all boils down to one word: stewardship. Now, as you heard the word stewardship, you may have experienced that Pavlovian response where we automatically reach to protect our wallets. And I understand it if you did, for we have been trained by countless preachers to understand stewardship as a codeword for “put more money in the offering plate.” But this morning I want to step back from this very limited definition to consider something more pressing. At the heart of it, Christ calls the church to be good stewards of the future of the church.

Similar to the themes of the sermons these past 3 weeks, the idea of stewardship of the future of the church has simply not been a consideration for 1,700 years. And the reason is simple: centuries of experience has taught us that the church tomorrow will look much like the church yesterday. We assumed the church and society, working in partnership, will ensure that the church will be fine. But that partnership has ended, and we can see the consequences all around us. Today pretty well everyone agrees that the church tomorrow will not look much like the church yesterday. Despite this, the most prevalent response by congregations is to try to think of ways to make their congregation survive in the form that has been meaningful to those currently in the church. For many congregations that is their functional goal. Jesus’ parable of the good stewards gives us (I think) a very pertinent and different point of view...a crucial point of view. A point of view that—if we adopt it—will actually liberate us to really think well about the future of our congregation.

We read, “for it is as if a man, going away on a journey, summoned his stewards and entrusted his property to them.” The parable says the Master entrusted “talents” to his servants. A talent was a measure of weight (like kilo’s or pounds), used to measure money. In other words, the Master entrusted all his wealth to his servants. Clearly, in this allegory the wealthy man of the parable is Jesus. His property / his wealth is the wellbeing of his

kingdom, the gospel message, Christ's brothers and sisters (us), the people of earth, creation, Christ's purposes and causes. All this Jesus entrusted into the hands of his followers. He told them after the resurrection, "Go, and make disciples of all peoples", "feed my sheep", "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Then Jesus went away on a journey—he ascended into heaven, promising to return. Where this parable gets us in trouble as we seek to understand it is where the story tells us that the master returns, meets those very same stewards he entrusted his wealth to, and receives it all back from them. In the parable the master's journey is short. But that's not been the experience of the church, has it? The master's journey away has been 2,000 years, so far. The first followers were good stewards of what was entrusted to them, and in time (as Jesus had not yet returned) they passed that trust on to the generation that followed them, who continued the work and passed the work on again to those who followed them. And so it has been for 2,000 years. "For it is as if a man, going away on a journey, summoned his stewards and entrusted his wealth to them." So it's worked out this way: each generation has not only been stewards for the sake of the master, but also for the sake of the generation that followed them. With what hope? To have the master find them to be "good and faithful stewards" of all his wealth that has been entrusted to the church.

We are not trained by the culture of our society to be stewards of the future. The captains of industry too easily focus on the company's next quarterly financial statement rather than the long term viability of the business. Think Nortel. Politicians too easily focus on what will get them elected next time rather than what is important a generation from now. We slowly create a growing environmental crisis that will have a significant impact on our grandchildren, yet we seem to do so little in response now. You get the picture. We see the same in congregations: most congregations do not see themselves as stewards of the future. For churches it is so easy to be drawn into a deer-caught-in-the-headlights focus on survival. The questions so many congregations ask today are: How do we meet budget this year? What modest changes could we make in order to attract young families? How do we continue to do what we've always done while our congregation gets older and smaller? And of course, congregations will ask these questions. It's natural. Congregations as they are / as they have been are deeply meaningful to us. Deeply. We would dearly love to keep it going as is. But the question inherent to Jesus' parable is "but what should be deeply meaningful to us?" What if we wish to hear our master say to us, "Well done, good and faithful steward. Enter into the joy of your master." In the parable one of the stewards took his portion of the master's wealth, what had been entrusted to him, buried it in the ground and did nothing with it. I fear that a lot of Presbyterian congregations are doing the same. But

not Varsity Acres Church. I put a proposal to your search committee, that in time went to your session, and ultimately to all of you, that if Varsity Acres really wanted to think about its future you might consider calling me. In that call I believe you were saying that "we aren't bury the master's wealth in the ground"...that you do want to be good stewards of what has been entrusted to you, including the next generation of Varsity Acres Church. And so we've begun this journey of discernment.

It is hard to change our mindset—to move beyond the concerns of the present (which are certainly important!) to add in a concern for the next generation of Varsity Acres Church. Most of that generation are nameless and faceless. It will be years before they join us. We don't know them like we know the person who sits next to us on the pew today. Psychologist Kimberley Wade-Benzoni of Duke University has been studying this reality for years. She calls the phenomenon "inter-generational discounting". Our human nature is simply to give those anonymous people in the future less priority compared to those around us today. In response she says we have to learn to apply the Golden Rule over time. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." The "other" she insists must now include the generation that follows us. Do unto them as you would have them do unto you.

Do you hear Varsity Acres story in this parable? I suspect you can. Here's one part of our story. In 1972 this congregation moved into its first building that cost the staggering sum of \$85,000 (!) and left them with a monumental mortgage of \$60,000. Back then that was a lot of money: the annual budget in 1972 was \$11,000. But the congregation did it, not just for their sake but also for ours today. Most of us weren't there in 1972. Most of us didn't pay down that mortgage. But it was that generation's gift to us...and we couldn't make due without Scott Hall. It was the same story in 1988. The gift that generation gave us was this lovely sanctuary. And while we enjoy the benefits of the last addition—and work like trojans to pay off its mortgage—this last addition is our gift to the generation that follows us. That's just part of our story. Whether you have named it this way or not, Varsity Acres Church already lives as a good steward of its future.

We already do this, but the times require us to do it more and far more intentionally. Our partnership with society started to drift in 1958. Since then the gulf between us has become quite wide and we see the consequences for the church all around us. But appreciating that history can sharpen our appreciation of our future. If we have seen this much change in my lifetime, how much more change will befall the church by the time the next generation is