

“Stewards of the Mysteries of God”

1 Corinthians 4:1-5

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According to the liturgical church calendar the actual start to the church year is the first Sunday of Advent, this year on December 2nd. It is the start of the church year because it is the start of having hope that God will come and change this weary world and make it better, which God does in the person of Jesus Christ. But everybody knows in practice, our church year starts about the beginning to middle of September when Sunday School starts, which this year it is today, September 16th.

I thought it would be good to be reminded of the awesome task to which God has called each and every one of us. You might be thinking, “Wait a minute! What awesome task? Didn’t we just get done with Street Fair?! I don’t have any calling like a pastor or something!” *Oh yes, you do.* If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, saved by grace through faith in him, you have a calling, a purpose higher and more grand than you might even realize. Paul, in 1 Corinthians sums up that calling when he says we are “stewards of the mysteries of God.” What a grand and high sounding phrase! Whatever does it mean?

A steward back then and into medieval times was not an owner of the estate, but a person in charge of how it ran. Did the farm make money? Was the livestock healthy? Was the work crew for the estate skillful and efficient? Being a steward was more than just taking care of the money, which is what many people think stewardship is all about and only about! No. Stewardship is about taking care of God’s stuff. Can you be a steward of God’s stuff? We already are! Why? Because everything belongs to God anyway. We are just taking care of it for God, hopefully, using it the way God wants us to use it.

An epistle is a letter. Of the 27 books in the New Testament, 21 are epistles, letters to individuals or congregations, and most were meant to be read in public. So, we read this letter to the 1st Church of Corinth. By all descriptions they were a tough bunch to be around. They consistently give Paul a hard time. They compare him negatively to other preachers. They criticize about anything he does in ministry and they complain about him while they believe they are the most wonderful, overwhelmingly friendly, always loving, saintly and spiritually-gifted congregation in the entire Mediterranean region. And humble, too! But we don’t have to worry about those who might seek to judge us, or put us down. There is only one judge to whom we must answer, one higher authority, a name above every name: Jesus Christ. Fortunately for us he is full of love and mercy.

To start with, Paul uses several words for “slave” or “servant” in the New Testament, but the one used here is special. Verse one: “As servants of Christ”. “Servant” here is not *doulos* or *diakonos* which we would expect. It is *hyperetes*, which means the service of another, but the emphasis is on the free choice to follow directions. That is someone like a physician’s assistant, an associate pastor, an apprentice carpenter. It can be thought of as “one who assists another as the instrument of his will.” You might even think of this person as a tool in the hand of the master: a scalpel in the hand of a surgeon, a pipe wrench in the hands of a plumber, a pen, a pencil, or a computer to a writer. At our best we are *hyperetes*. We are God’s tools in his hand, designed for a certain purpose, moving by God’s will and direction. This special word *hyperetes* only appears in one other place in Acts, in 26:16. Paul has his Damascus Road encounter. He is blinded by a light from heaven, knocked off his horse, and a voice says, “Stand on your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you a *servant*.” Again, the word is *hyperetes*, a tool to be used at God’s will and direction. Paul is saying this is what shapes what we do as a church: that we know we are *under orders* from God. We move at God’s discretion and initiative.

I once had a wise mentor who said, “Churches do not spend nearly enough time intentionally asking this question, ‘What is it *God* wants us to do?’ And then waiting until an answer comes.” I agree. What are our current orders from God, right now?

According to Paul, each of us is not only a tool in God’s hand, used at God’s discretion. We are also “stewards of the mysteries of God.” There are many things we do, as God’s tools, in God’s church, the effects of which we can never fully comprehend, or maybe even partly understand. Baptism, marriage, confession and pardon, communion, a gift to help a mission at a critical time, or a donation to a family down on their luck, a word of encouragement when all seems hopeless, a word of sympathy when something tragic happens, a devotional read to a committee, a Bible lesson taught to a Sunday School class of adults, middle schoolers, or younger students, a helpful hand at a bar-be-cue pit, who refuses to stop flipping chicken even when the smoke is choking and stings the eyes, a hand to clean a dining table, a visit to a bedridden friend, a note written to encourage, a faithful reading of scripture to a congregation, a skillful playing of an instrument in worship, a heartfelt choral anthem, a careful record of notes made for a board, a sincere prayer offered to heaven. These and more, much, much more, we are responsible for when we wake up every morning. Yes. It’s not just here where we need to be responsible stewards of the mysteries of God but everywhere, every day, everything we are doing. Being a Christian, being a steward of the mysteries of God, is not an on-again, off-again activity. We don’t get to pick and choose when it is convenient and when it is not. It is full-time, 24/7/365.

What are the mysteries of God to which we are entrusted? We can't fully understand them. It is a mystery that the wise cannot discern. Only a fool for Christ might begin to comprehend. The mystery is the *Good News*. The mystery is on Good Friday, "It is finished." The mystery is on Easter morning: "He is alive!" The mystery says, "Don't be afraid. I am with you to the end of the age." The mystery says, "I will deliver you." Being a steward of this mystery is to be trustworthy, faithful, in saying what Jesus said to remind people of God's mystery. Why is it a mystery? Because human's don't speak with this kind of faith. Only God does. While we don't have perfect faith, God is always trustworthy. All we have to do is pass on the words, so people remember and know and have the opportunity to begin to believe.

And it's not just the pastor who is involved in the mystery, you know, but all of us. It's a together thing. When we say a prayer of confession we are reminded again of the mystery: "In Jesus Christ we are forgiven." A mystery happens in the community of believers when hands are laid on the head of a child, or an adult, in baptism and the mystery is said, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." The mystery is present again when at communion it is said, "This is my body broken for you. This is my blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins." When at the funeral service the mystery is declared again, "I am the resurrection and the life." When we speak to the ones at the grave whose loss is beyond bearing, we are again entrusted with the mystery of God. "Because I live, you shall live also." There it is: a mystery beyond imagining. To dare to say these words in the very presence of death, is to invoke God's awesome mystery, more powerful, much more powerful, than mere death.

Ephesians 3 records yet another mystery for which we must be good stewards. Previously, it was thought Jesus would only come to the Jewish people, but in a number of places, he reached out to people who were not Jewish: the Gentiles. The Gentiles (that is, anyone *not* Jewish) were unclean. Many had worshipped idols, but were now turning in faith to Jesus. Their dining habits were disgusting to most Jews. They ate what was considered unclean food. Pigs and snails, and clams and octopus, and about anything that would make a good Jew throw up, which today you can easily find on a Red Lobster menu. Now Gentiles were brought into the family of God. God, in Jesus, was reconciling the entire world, the entire cosmos to himself. That means, even people I don't like or agree with, people who look differently than I do, people who act and live differently than I do, God is reaching out to all of them in Jesus Christ, and I am to reach out too, as a steward of the mysteries of God. It's a mystery to me, because I don't know how in the world all this reconciliation stuff is ever going to work out! Fortunately, it is not up to me. It's not up to you. It's up to God.

What is required of us as stewards? That which is *always* required of stewards: that we be *trustworthy*, that we be faithful as stewards of the mystery. Success in what we do as followers of Jesus Christ is not the issue and it is not guaranteed. All that is required of us as individuals and as a church, is that we are faithful to the orders we have received from on high. Nothing else. Success or failure is up to God. Don't worry about that. God does not say "Go and succeed!" God says, "Go and do!" Sometimes we feel we have failed God when something we felt we were ordered to do by God did not work out the way we wanted. We did not fail at all. We succeeded completely, because we were asked to go and do. And we did exactly as we were asked to do. There might also be a great reason in God's will for this supposed "failure."

Being faithful to our marching orders is not always easy. Many influences want us to ditch the gospel as old, antiquated, useless, even judgmental. But the world does not know God. The world does not believe there really is good news. The world often tells lies. It seeks easy answers to the deepest questions which can only be answered by God in time. When we are faithful stewards of the mysteries of God, God will heal souls. God will change lives. The broken will be made whole. Through our God-directed words and deeds, God's power will shape the world. Amen.