

ANSWERING THE QUESTION

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Stewardship Sunday, November 23, 2014

In the name of the Father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Two Key Words for Stewardship

I was asked by the Church Council to offer a stewardship sermon this Sunday, and it sort of is that, I suppose. What I would like to talk about is part theology, part philosophy, and part common sense. “Flow” and “keep” are two words regarding stewardship. I’m not really sure whether this thought is deep and profound or whether it’s as plain as day or maybe a little bit of both.

The way in which we approach our lives is part of a flow for our human bodies. Imagine a baby. Air goes in; air comes back out. God always burps a baby. For the rest of us, liquid goes in; liquid goes out. Solid goes in; solid goes out. Interrupt that flow in any particular way, and you’ve got a problem. It’s a flow. If it goes in, it had better come out.

There’s a river that flows into the Dead Sea. The reason it’s called the Dead Sea is because the Jordan River doesn’t flow out. It just evaporates. It continues to build up toxic levels of minerals so nothing lives there except some bacteria.

Keep Prudence and Thoughtfulness Balanced

Regarding finance or money, one person’s expense is another person’s income. It too is a flow. You can all imagine somebody whose flow goes in, but by golly it just dribbles back out. And you don’t like that kind of person. Such people are greedy; they’re misers. On the other hand, if the flow goes in and it flows too easily out, it’s like a hemorrhage. So the flow ought to result in a balance of *keeping* prudence and thoughtfulness balanced with making sure that the *flow* continues, that it goes back out as well.

I never had these kinds of thoughts until my kids were in college. I had a revelatory moment while sitting at my computer, which was a precious moment for me. I was in the process of writing a \$12,000 check to the University of Chicago for tuition and expenses for one of my kids. I’m sitting there, and I’m about – pardon my French – about as pissy as it gets with me writing that check. I did not want to write it, but the check was half-written.

I began daydreaming about what I could do with \$12k. I’d like to upgrade my car because I’ve driven crappy cars all my life. I’d like to upgrade furniture. There’s stuff I could do in the house. All sorts of stuff, and my mind wandered. But in its wandering, I began to refocus, and I suddenly realized that the number-one thing I would do if I had extra money was to invest in my kids. Well wait a minute, that’s what I *am* doing! It dawned on me that one of the most

precious gifts of my life was that thought. I realized the expenditure that induced a poor frame of mind in me was exactly what I would do if I didn't have any constraints, if I was given just what I wanted to do.

If I have any kind of thought to give you on a stewardship Sunday, it's to *keep the balance*. Never let it get too far one way or the other. Stinginess or hemorrhaging. Keep the flow. My mom died of a blockage. I've got this in the forefront of my mind and my heart right now. She had an intestinal blockage, and that's what killed her. So there you go – hoarding in any form is unhealthy.

Coming in, Going out – That's Flow

Grace comes into your life; let grace go out of your life toward others. Forgiveness comes into your life; let forgiveness go out. Love comes into your life; make sure love goes out. Whatever it is – money is just one of the things on the list – if it's coming into your life, make sure it goes back out. That's flow, and you will have a healthy attitude toward life.

The other word that I wanted to talk about today is “keep.” It's a kind of “throw-away” word. Do you remember Bob Whitcomb? He died a number of years ago, and I had never preached on Psalm 121 until his funeral. For some reason, it came into my mind, and then I decided to preach on Psalm 121.

Bob was noteworthy in a couple ways. He was a widower I believe, if memory serves, and his daughter was instrumental in caring for him. He sang in the choir, but the singular thing about him is that he had one lame joke per week. To give you a feel for it, I don't remember a single one of those jokes. They were terrible, but he had one every week for us.

“The Lord Is Thy Keeper”;

Are You Your Brother's Keeper?

And so at his funeral, in the sermon I was looking at Psalm 121, and it's noteworthy that in this psalm is the line “The Lord is thy keeper.” It made me think of the last time I heard that word and that kind of thought, which goes way back into Genesis, where Cain has just murdered his brother Abel in this primal story. And God says, “Hey, where's Abel,” and Cain pretty much replies, “I dunno.”

Then Cain asks, “Am I my brother's keeper? In my opinion, the whole of the Bible, all thirty pounds of it, is an answer to that question, and it is resoundingly “Yes.” In one story after another, after another, ad nauseum, the answer is “Yes.”

The biblical evidence is overwhelming. There's Isaiah 58; Matthew 25, which we just looked at in the scripture reading; the parable of the Good Samaritan. In the opening sermon, when Jesus is beginning his ministry, he gave his own mission statement: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release

to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." It's the same list as in Janet's reading from Matthew 25 – poor, prisoner, blind, oppressed.

He Will Keep Your Life

Now, those aren't just blighted individuals; they are classes of people, which invites us to use the word "social," as in "social justice." They are people with specific disadvantages, making them susceptible to being manipulated or oppressed or even quashed by the majority, should that majority choose to do so. From Psalm 121 come the comforting words "The Lord is your keeper . . . he will keep your life."

A sidebar on this, by the way, is that Psalm 121 is stolen almost verbatim from the Egyptians. There is a strange line in it that says, "The sun shall not smite you by day nor the moon by night." The average person isn't likely to worry much about being smitten by the moon. It's plagiarized from the Egyptians, who had the Sun God and the Moon God. And so the writer of that psalm simply kept the general verbiage but changed the sense to mean that the Lord "shall not smite you by day nor the moon by night."

There's More to Keeping than Meets the Eye

Anyway, this notion of "keep" is a simple word, easily overlooked. So I'd like you to look at it a bit more deeply. A little girl asks her mommy – she's just encountered a toad and has it in her hand – and says, "Mommy, can I keep it?" Now the little kid has in mind playing with it for the day or so, but the mom has a much-greater understanding of what is involved in keeping a toad – looking out for it, food, shelter, all those things, what's needed to keep the toad alive. Can I keep a kitten or a dog or a pony? And the parent thinks hold on a minute. "There's more to 'keeping' than meets the hopes of a child."

In "Lord of the Rings," a whole community is under attack, and they flee to a place called Helm's Deep, a fortress built into the side of a mountain. Ultra-safe, ultra-secure, and referred to by their King Thioden, in Tolkien's old English, as a "keep." In sports, the goalie or the goal tender is also called the goalkeeper. And I could give you a hundred other examples.

"Am I my brother's keeper? The scriptures give an unqualified "Yes." *We are to look out for one another.*

Allow me to deepen your thinking a little more. The key to Cain's question doesn't revolve around the word "keep" at all. It revolves around the word "brother." Any motivation you may feel toward other persons to help them out, to show kindness or compassion I bet will be rooted in whether or not you consider them "family."

Where Do the Boundaries of Family Lie?

The follow-up question is “Where do the boundaries of family lie?” I have my nuclear family, and then I’ve got my church family. I care about you guys a lot, but not as much as my nuclear family. And then there’s the community. There’s the guy on the street waiting for a bus, who continually puts his cigarette butt on our lawn. There are people in other countries. Where do I draw the line between who’s family and who’s not?

Einstein – got to have an Einstein quote – said that the spiritual quest is expanding the circle of who we call family. Spiritually immature persons only care about themselves, whereas those who are only slightly more spiritually mature may well care about me and mine. And the spiritually mature sort of get it that we are a human family. *Psalm 121: “The Lord is thy keeper.”*

Now what I’d like you to do is to pretend for a moment that you’re in a math class, and I want to do equations for you. “The Lord . . . is . . . thy keeper.” “The Lord” equals “thy keeper.” It’s an equation. Or, if you are grammatically inclined, it’s a subject followed by a predicate, which in this case breaks down into a verb and an object. Therefore – if you can find fault in this logic, let me know – insofar as you are Godly, you will look out for the other person. Am I wrong about that if it’s true that the Lord is thy keeper?

Do you see the importance of teaching our kids, both our own children and other people’s children, how to treat the “other” person and what is the nature of God toward God’s creation? If God is loving and nurturing and parental, shouldn’t we be telling our kids that? Of course, the answer is a ringing “Yes!”

A couple months ago, I celebrated my thirtieth anniversary of ordination. (Can’t believe I lasted this long.) Going through old pictures, we had some of them set up on the table in the Parlor. One of the photos caught my eye because it was a picture of the sign out in front of the church where I was ordained. What I had done that day was to preach that morning, and that afternoon was devoted to the ceremony for ordination, with a different person preaching. I looked at that sign, and the sermon title was “The Lord Will Keep Your Life.” It’s a quote from Psalm 121. I’ve been preaching on it for thirty years now.

This notion of God keeping us and therefore us keeping others is not peripheral. It’s foundational, it’s central. It is the sine qua non without which there is nothing.

Janet read Matthew 25. Here’s what Isaiah 58 says: “If you remove the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness, and if you give yourself to the hungry, satisfy the desires of the afflicted, then your light will rise in darkness, and your gloom will become like midday. And the Lord will continually guide you and satisfy your desire even in scorched places and give strength to your bones, and you will be like a watered garden, like a spring of water whose waters do not fail.”

Support your church. Flow and keep the bounds, and you will be healthy.

Thank you.