Plymouth
CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

# RESPONDING FAITHFULLY TO THE GIFT OF LIFE

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*November 8, 2026*
***Sermon 3 of 3 on stewardship, related to Deuteronomy 8:11-18***

CENTRAL FOCUS:

**Steward is a foundational identity of a person of faith from which we respond in gratitude for the gift of life and its blessings.**

*11 "Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God by failing to keep the Divine commandments, ordinances, and statutes that I am commanding you today. 12 When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them 13 and when your herds and flocks have multiplied and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, 14 then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, 15 who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. God made water flow for you from flint rock. 16 God fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you and in the end to do you good. 17 Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.' 18 But remember the Lord your God, for it is the Holy One who gives you power to get wealth, so that God may confirm the Divine covenant that God swore to your ancestors, as God is doing today.*

These are the words of our ancient tradition.
May the Living Word of God in Scripture be alive within us, among us, and beyond us.

I was 19 and a freshman at Albion College in south central Michigan. Our Dean of the Chapel, Rev. Dr. Franklin, stepped in to preach. He was a learned man and a very large man so he was a strong presence in the large, elevated pulpit of Wesley Chapel which rose above the many rows of pews and people. On that Sunday morning decades ago, he shared a story of a man that people referred to as "self-made." At the end of the story, he grabbed both sides of the great U-shaped pulpit, leaned over the front, and said quite directly and firmly, "There is no such thing as a self-made man!" Like a lightning bolt, that truth went to my core—went straight to the deep 'never forget that' place in me.

Dr. Franklin's words imprinted on me. They remind me of what I have talked about here, that in the second Creation story of our tradition, God forms with the Divine Hands a creature of earth, breathes into it the breath of life, and places that one in the Garden to till and keep it. The faith inspired identity here is *creature,* one who is Created (not self-made), deeply related to the earth and charged with tending to the earth (The Garden).

We read from the Book of Deuteronomy today, an ancient book that is a part of the long creation story of the Hebrew people coming to be a people. Deuteronomy is essentially one long speech addressed to the

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***Please note:*** *This is an unedited preaching script.*

Hebrew people attributed to the mouth of Moses and given to them as they prepare to shift from wandering in the wilderness to inhabiting what they believe is their Promised Land.

The Deuteronomy passage reminds the people that their wealth is not self-made, nor are they. God is Creator of Life, Liberator from Egypt, and Guide through the wilderness. God is their maker and sustainer. And this perspective is echoed throughout Scripture, as it says in the beginning of Psalm 24, "The world and all that is in it belong to God." Acknowledging Creator is acknowledging we are not self-made nor owners of the earth or anything that is in it. The orientation of faith is that life is a gift given to us.

What I am suggesting today is that 'steward' is a faithful identity from which we can respond faithfully. Indeed, we are named as created, not self-made. Creation is named as God's, not owned by humanity or any human. In the eyes of faith, 'ownership' is a legal and social convention, not a basic reality. In the eyes of faith, humility about what we think we achieve by ourselves alone is best. This 'not self-made' and 'not owners' reality leads to 'steward' as an identity of faith from which we can respond faithfully.

A steward must have a faithful relationship to Creator / Source. If you are a steward, then there must be another to whom you are related and in service. That relationship asks a response. In the case of the Garden of Eden story the relationship leads to a responding role of Garden keeper as I have spoken about before. In the case of those about to enter the Promised Land, the relationship encourages a humble fidelity to God and a gratitude that keeps people from thinking it all belongs to them.

What about us today? As the sacred word speaks to us, does it not also ask that we are Garden keepers, that we keep humble fidelity with the Divine Way of Love, and nurture an attitude of gratitude for the gift of life? Does it not also call to us to steward faithfully the lives of our families and communities and world?

I don't know if you or your kids were ever participants in the high school student experiment where you are given an egg to take care of as if it was a baby. The egg that's given must be taken care of all the time, whether they are sleeping or waking or schooling or working or playing. It's often done in the context of a high school health course to educate students about the responsibility of parenting and the consequences of early pregnancy.

Whether the gift of life is that of another in the form of a child or the life that is ours or the life of a community or the earth, the faithful identity in response to the gift of life is steward. The gift of life has been given to us, and we are asked to take care of it, to nurture it and be responsible for it. That is the call of Divine love.

Today we come to the conclusion of our responding faithfully journey, and we will consecrate our estimates of giving in our worship later.

I was taught about giving while growing up in church through putting coins in a folder or other means to give of my allowance. (Studies show that teaching giving early leads to giving later in life.) And I had understood that giving was a proportional thing, a percentage thing. A to-whom-much-was-given-much-was-expected kind of thing, but also from the story of the widow in Mark's gospel who gave a small amount compared to others, but for whom that amount was a lot. She was praised by Jesus.

I know that church stewardship drives can be seen as the church equivalent of the United Way's annual fundraising campaign. There is some truth to that, I guess, but to see it just as that impoverishes us in our seeking of faith and serving God. We as a church could just say here's money we want or need, but that

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would focus on the church needing money and you are here to provide it. There's some truth to that, but again, that approach neglects the deeper issue of faith and life, of our relationship to money and material. That is where the deeper questions come into play.

Who does this life belong to? What do I really need?
What is the mission of my life? What mission does God call this church to?
What could the money I steward do to support that mission?
Do I really believe in that mission enough to give?
How much is enough? How much is faithful?

Only you can respond to these questions.
My invitation in discerning a response to these questions is to go back to faith; to faith in the deep mystery of Divine love, to faith in the oneness of all life, to faith that knows we are all stewards of life who have been given a great gift. If a faith like that is alive in us and we are in touch with it, then we will respond faithfully when love calls.

Today is Faithful Response Sunday for the purposes of bringing together our covenant community in supporting our ministries here at Plymouth. But let us also make every day a faithful response day. Then we truly will steward our lives faithfully.

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