

I was recently talking to another pastor about what membership vows mean. We often think about vows at big times in our life - like when we get married, or the vows that sponsors of children make at baptism. A vow is this promise that is being made to uphold something powerful, something weighty. Additionally, as Christians we realize that we cannot begin to uphold these vows on our own - that it has to be the good work of God within us.

The same is true when we join a local church. I often explain the vows in this way, we join a local church because we say that this, right here, is where I want to put down my roots and be part of the community of faith. Adam Hamilton once said that when folks ask what they get out of membership in the church, in other words what their personal benefit will be. Instead, its about saying that this is where I am going to *serve* the Kingdom of God.

And at its heart, my friends, that is what stewardship is. It's serving God. Serving God with our prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness.

Sometimes we get caught up in the idea of stewardship like a to-do list. We read this morning a piece of the scripture often referred to as the Rich Young Ruler. This person comes to Jesus and asks this weighty question - what must I do to inherit eternal life. In other words what steps do I need to take to ensure that I make it into heaven. And Jesus said, keep the commandments, which he goes on to list. "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

And the Rich Young Ruler replied - Great! I've done all of those. So I'm all set right? To which Jesus added one more thing - sell all you have, give the money away, and come and follow me.

The Rich Young Ruler, like so many of us, are looking for a check list. If I do this and not that, I'm all set right? But friends, being a Christian isn't about a set of rules or obligations. Its about having a heart that is set on the Kingdom of God, not the Kingdom of self. Its about using the entirety of our being to chase after the heat of God and to make God known to the world, because the light of Christ dwells deep within us!

What would it look like for this to be in action? I think it would look like using our unique spiritual gifts to serve the world. Do you have the gift of talking to children and families? What would it look like to use those gifts to help with the Halloween Hospitality Table this week? Do you have the gift of hospitality? Join the wonderful ladies who help with our funeral meals. Do you have a heart to teach? Start a small group or Bible Study. Do you love kids? Talk about helping with VBS this coming year. There are so many places to serve within this church and if you don't find one that fits you, we can talk about creating new opportunities.

But the reality is, like the Rich Young Ruler, giving of ourselves totally, is often not on our agenda. As much as we bemoan talking about stewardship in terms of money in the local church, we would rather donate money than time, because time is so precious and finite to us. When I look at what is sometimes hardest on the list of vows, its presence - showing up, because it requires of us giving of our time, which seems to be slipping through our fingers.

We want a list of rules that we can feel good looking at - saying well I did that or didn't do that, so I must be okay, instead of realizing that until our heart is focused on God's Kingdom first, we are missing something. Until we long, yes long, to let the light of Christ shine through us, we may be holding on to what we treasure the most.

In the sixth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus points out just that - asking where our treasure truly is, because that's what our heart is going to be focused on. For the Rich Young Ruler, Jesus was able to look into his heart and see what he desired the most - and that it wasn't really the Kingdom of God.

Yet, we are all asked to take what we treasure the most and see how it compares to the treasure we have in Heaven. It is not lost on me that the Rich Young Ruler is asking how to inherit eternal life, but in the end the current desire of his heart outweighed this question that was on his lips.

Once again, practically, what does it look like to store up our treasures in heaven? It looks like giving it to God. And friends, that may not be money. That may not be time. It may be other things for each of us. We are uniquely created and have unique passions. Whatever it may be for you, and however different it may be from others gathered in this place this day, know that giving can be hard for any of us, especially if it is deeply rooted in our hearts. To give away, means to not have any more. And yet, as we give away we make space in our lives to be channels of God's grace and love that we have received.

When we take vows to serve the local church through our prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness, we are saying that we are investing with all we are in the work of the Kingdom of God. That we would lay it on the line so that others may come to know our Savior. And that take trust. Trusting God with what we have. Trusting God with what is to come. And for our longings to be for the name of God to be made known. And that, my friends, is transformative. Not just for those who will be reached by the love of God, but for us as well.

Friends, we love and serve a God who wants all of us. Not just part of us. I'm not sure where you are in your faith journey today, but if you have yet to know the love of a Savior, we would love to talk to you about Jesus after worship today. If you have accepted Christ, but you are at the place where this God thing is more about do's and don'ts than longing for the Kingdom of God, we would love to pray for you today. And if you are giving of yourself for the sake of Jesus, may we encourage you today to keep going on. Let us, Juniata United Methodist Church, be a place of stewardship of our lives, so the joy of the Lord may be made known. Amen.