

[In 1996 Pastor Freeseemann was awarded the Dr. Richard Lee Peterman **Good Steward Award**, by the Lutheran Laity Movement for Stewardship. This award is given annually to the ELCA pastor who best represents the principles of biblical stewardship in his or her life and work. At that time Pastor Freeseemann was asked to prepare an article for the Lutheran Laity Movement for Stewardship magazine - *Faith in Action*.]

"How Far Is It To Los Angeles?"

A Stewardship Question

by

Revd. John L. Freeseemann

I am, by choice, the pastor of a "small" congregation. I have been the pastor of a small congregation for almost the entire time that I have been in parish ministry. And I firmly believe that ministry in a small congregation is what our Lord had in mind when he was doing his work as prophet, priest, and king (and steward!).

Over the past 20 years, I have been taught a great deal by those to whom I have been called as pastor. Small congregations have a way of doing that to (and for) their pastors. Pastors should never reach a point, however, where we believe that we have learned it all. With that as a motto, I recently discovered a new question. I think that it is an important question for the life of the Church in today's world, as it is applicable to a wide variety of situations as well as to both small and large congregations. The question is: "How far is it to Los Angeles?"

I know that some of you may be uncomfortable with this destination. You may want to substitute Des Moines, or Buffalo, or Dallas, or Seattle, or Miami, or Sheboygan. But, stick with me! After all, it's my question, so it shall remain Los Angeles.

I first discovered this question in a Long Range Planning session with some of the members of my current congregation. As the committee gathered for their first meeting they were filled with excitement. All of them had ideas they wanted to share with one another and with me, as well as with the rest of the congregation. In short, they were prepared to totally remake every aspect of the congregation in one evening, and move us lock, stock and barrel in several new directions.

Not having expected this response, I thought that I had better do something quickly to bring them back to earth. Getting their attention, I said: "I don't want to start by talking about all of your ideas. I know that they are all good

and will help us to strengthen the ministry of our congregation. I know that they will challenge us to move in new directions. What I want to know is: 'How far is it to Los Angeles?'. "

I don't know where the question came from, but there it was. In their excitement (and perhaps their resolve to get past my agenda and on to their own) the answers came fast and furious. "It's 375 miles," said one. Another said: "It's about 7 1/2 hours to Los Angeles." "No way," said yet another. "It's 6 hours to Los Angeles, unless pastor is driving. Then it's only 5!" The debate raged on for quite some time. Miles were thrown about and hours and minutes of travel time were offered. Finally they all admitted that they were stumped. The plain and simple fact was that they just didn't know how far it was to Los Angeles.

And they were right! They didn't know. Why? Because they were so caught up in giving answers that they never asked the question that comes next: "What is our departure point?" That's the key to answering how far it is to Los Angeles. You need to know where you are starting from. That's the key to answering many of the questions that plague our congregations (and our member's lives) in this modern day.

In the Gospel According to Matthew (19: 16-22) our Lord encounters the rich young man who asks: "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" (How far is it to Los Angeles?) And our Lord's answer is one of asking the question "What's your departure point?" First he asks about the Ten Commandments, all of which the young man claims to have observed. Then our Lord focuses on the relationship between the rich young man and that rival deity which so many choose to worship: money.

"...go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." But sadly, the rich young man could not. His love for his possessions held him back. He thought that Los Angeles (eternal life) was far off, and it wasn't worth the cost. The cost seemed too high for what he would get in return, and he remained ensnared by a slavery that he didn't even want to admit existed.

I have always wondered what happened next, and I suspect more than just a few of you have also. Did our Lord hear his fear and the bondage which brought it about? Did Jesus affirm his "no" and then ask him again to embrace a life of stewardship. Did the rich young man realize that the trip, no matter where it's point of departure, is begun with the first step and that God accompanies us through every step of the journey? Did he realize the freedom that had been

offered and throw off the shackles of his enslavement?

How many "rich young men", regardless of income, age or gender, do we have in our congregations? Good people, seeking to be stewards and not knowing how, who respond to our fall budget campaigns in the same manner as the rich young man in Matthew: they turn away. They turn off the year in and year out "let's meet the budget" stewardship process to which we doggedly cling, because it only seeks to sustain the status quo of the institution without offering them any sense of ministry. They are bored by the internal looking, exclusionary nature of what is taking place as we attempt to justify the budget for another year, rather than being excited by an external looking, inclusive vision of ministry to others. As a result, they miss out on the freedom that being a steward brings. When this happens, they and the Church remain ensconced in bondage.

Why do we leave them there, and as a result leave the Church in bondage as well? Why do those who have been given the gift of leadership within God's Church allow these good people to remain in their fear and bondage (a bondage which they, and we, frequently don't even acknowledge is taking place)? Why do we hear their "no" without realizing what is so often behind it? Why do we leave them to struggle with the bondage which causes the "no", rather than affirming them, helping them to work through whatever has enslaved them, and then inviting them once again to make a decision about living a stewardship lifestyle.

Or, when we do try to move them into a stewardship lifestyle, why do we insist upon asking for a modern day "guilt offering", rather than asking for an informed decision concerning what God's will is for their lives? It is well and good for people within the Church to be told by pastors and synods and bishops that "everyone should tithe". That is a rather simplistic position, however, which has nothing to do with reality or where people's lives are focused.

This method of developing tithers within the Church misses one very important point: tithing isn't for everybody! For some, before they learn to be a steward, it is a goal to be reached. For others, who are well into the journey and already tithing, it is now a point of departure. For still others, it is already the point from which they started. They have grown far beyond a tithe. For everyone, however, a tithe is never a final resting place in the stewardship journey. It is either a place we are going toward, a place to stay for just a while, or a place from which we have already departed.

That is one problem with simply stressing that people should tithe. It lays a guilt trip upon some. It stifles others. And it is filled with law, rather

than gospel, for everyone.

This guilt methodology also doesn't take into account what the person's life situation might be. They may be captured by the voices of our culture, which tell us that our worth is based upon what we possess. As a result they may not be emotionally able to give away what they have worked so hard to attain. They may literally be on the brink of bankruptcy, just barely keeping their family sheltered and fed. To insist that such a person should tithe is perhaps one of the worst things that a pastor might do. And, to guilt them into tithing might be even worse! They may not be ready, in their personal faith journey, to move into a tithe. Perhaps they need to grow beyond the faith that calls for a minimum of involvement into a faith which understands (in terms of talents and money) what it means to take up the cross and follow our Lord as disciples. Perhaps they are at a point where a tithe is not enough. They could be among those people who need to be challenged to be "Zacchaeus Givers", giving away 50% of all that they possess.

The point is that we don't know unless we ask. We cannot know the intimate details, the fears, or the bondage, of our parishioner's lives unless we invite them on the journey and ascertain their point of departure. Having accomplished that, and having discovered how far it is to Los Angeles, or tithing, or understanding stewardship in terms of lifestyle, or being a Zacchaeus Giver, or attempting to discern the will of God in all of life, a panoply of other questions seek our attention.

The first of these might well be: "Do you really want to go to Los Angeles?" If the answer is "no", then the process must start all over again. As long as fear and bondage hold our people back, we must affirm them in their bondage and continue to invite them on the journey. In the end, when they can respond, "Yes, I want to go to Los Angeles!" there will be other questions to be asked.

Having decided, however, that we want to be a part of the journey, knowing what our point of departure is and where we want to go, it is essential that we determine two things: what route we will take and how far along the route we will go as we begin to move toward Los Angeles. This is a decision about "Proportionate Share Giving". How much of the total can we commit to at this point in time? Some will want to go all of the way at once, and will be able to handle it. Good! Others, however, may not be so brave or so able. They may only be willing to go part of the way. This is also good! The affirmation is for their willingness to move and change. They have begun the journey, and this

must be affirmed. Then they must be invited to move even farther.

Another question is: "When do we want to move farther toward Los Angeles?" Do we want to do it right away? Is there a planned incremental movement? How much farther do we want to go before stopping for a second time? All of this involves the question of "Growth Giving". We have a new point of departure and must decide all over again whether or not we really want to go to Los Angeles, and is so how much closer we want to get. The decision is now easier, for we know that we are protected and that God is with us on the journey. Regardless of the decision, however, it must be affirmed and the person must then be invited to move farther.

Yet again, each step of the way we are confronted by the question of whether this is really what we want. Why not do something that we want to do, rather than going to Los Angeles. Perhaps some time traveling toward another destination would be a welcome change. Perhaps we would like to take a little side trip and do a little sight-seeing, or give up the trip altogether. This tugging involves the question of "First Fruit Giving". Do we let our own indulgence rule our lives as we take care of self first or do we place God's Kingdom first?

Do we give our best to God or simply return "leftovers". As this question is struggled with, once again the decisions must be affirmed and the person must be invited to move farther.

The marvelous aspect of this questioning and answering, this affirming and inviting, is that we are always faced with the new. There is nothing about the stewardship lifestyle that is ever rote. Rather, we are constantly moving into new territory and facing new challenges. In turn we are also discovering new freedom, bestowed upon us by the one who is steward of all.

As I see it, the challenge for leaders in the church is to invite others to live this stewardship lifestyle. We are called to care for and to nurture our people. As they live with their fears, we are supposed to help them to recognize what is taking place and enable them to throw off their bondage. We are to help them discover the freedom that living a stewardship lifestyle brings. We are called to invite our people into first fruit, proportionate share, growth giving as a way of life. We are to share with them the joy of stewardship and as they respond we, and they, will be blessed by the results.

How far is it to Los Angeles? It's still a great distance, but it gets closer every day. There are still many questions to be asked, and new answers to be given. It is, however, a trip filled with great joy as every day the will of

God is discerned by those who seek to live a lifestyle of stewardship and as bondage is thrown off and freedom is discovered. May it be the same for each of you.

Faith In Action
Fall 1996 Edition
September 1996