

Proper 25A
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Consecration Sunday

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Last weekend I got to visit an orphanage in Tijuana.¹ It was started by Episcopalians more than 20 years ago and is now a ministry of the Diocese of San Diego. The founders had discovered that when parents were put in jail their children often had nowhere to go, so they went to jail, too. Vida Joven started to care for those children, to see that they were fed and housed and went to school until their parents were again able to care for them. The laws in Mexico changed 15 years ago to forbid the presence of children in jails. Today Vida Joven is still in the same building near the city jail, but now it houses children who've been abandoned and abused. There were about 30 last weekend, though they have room for about 50. Many of them come as toddlers and stay until they're 18. The work is supported by a board in the US, who raises funds, and a board in Mexico, who oversees the day to day operations. They have a good strategic plan, and are looking toward the next chapter, which they hope will include transitional housing and programs for teenagers who are aging out of the program.

Vida Joven is a good example of the kind of stewardship that grows into new challenges and possibilities. We heard several examples in the readings this morning, too. Moses has led his complaining flock for decades in the desert, and

¹ <http://vidajovendemexico.org/>

now they're about to cross the river into the land they've been searching for since they left Egypt. He's lived a full life, had a memorable trip out of Pharaoh's land, he's named and blessed his successor, Joshua, and now God's led him up to the top of a mountain to get a view of the new garden his people will inhabit. But it's time to pass the torch and give up his spirit. This is scene where he gets to hear "well done, good and faithful servant, now enter into your rest." He's been a good steward, and he's passing on the work to the next one, who will have to lead this motley crew into a new home and figure out how to live in a new and freer context.

Paul's doing something similar in his letter to the folks in Thessaloniki. Like Moses, he wants the whole story known – he complains about how he's been treated, and boasts a little about the courage his work has required. He reminds them that he's had their best interests at heart, and that he wasn't just a steward of the gospel but willing to share his own self with them. He's preparing for his own "well done, good and faithful one" scene.

There's even an echo in the gospel, not only the reminder that the prime task of all faithful people is to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves, but that the relationship between David and the Messiah is also about passing on the mantle.

The concept we call stewardship has its biblical origins in household management. The steward was the servant in charge of seeing that all parts of the household – people, livestock, fields, granaries, fishponds, woodlots, vineyards and so on – were managed in such a way that all could flourish. It's the kind of work originally given to Adam and Eve in the garden – tilling and caring for the trees and plants that provided food. The challenge for us is mostly about scale – rather than just a nuclear family, the biblical context sees a much bigger household. It's about the whole community. Moses was the steward of the whole band of Hebrews who left Egypt. David was steward of the nation of Israel – and Messiah is the steward of humanity. Paul was steward of a bunch of different communities around the Mediterranean. We're the stewards of our communities – we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, the keepers of trees and watersheds, wanderers in Bend and orphans in Mexico.

I read a powerful report a couple of days ago² about girls and young women who escaped Boko Haram with explosives strapped to their bodies. These girls and teenagers didn't want to blow themselves or anyone else up, but their deliverance came only at the hands of people who were brave enough to set them free. Some were soldiers, and some were random strangers – we might call them

² *NY Times* 26 Oct17

friends of God. They could have run the other way, but those liberators somehow recognized their responsibility as stewards of a larger community.

Our journey as Christians is about an ever-growing view of the landscape – like Moses climbing up to the summit of Mt. Nebo. He can see the whole landscape where his people expect to find a home. It's taken him 120 years to get there, but now at the end of his life, he can see the whole shebang – a glimpse of God's future and not just the backside he got to see in last week's gospel.

That widening concern or expanding view is what our journey in Christ is really about. Loving God with all we are and have, and loving our neighbors as ourselves is ultimately about recognizing that we're the stewards of this blessed creation, not its lords, and that there are far more neighbors in the household than we've noticed before.

The focus of this Consecration Sunday is about that larger view. When I was in my early 20s and beginning to be active as an adult, I got some help to start expanding the view I had of the world and my part in it. I don't think I made a pledge until I was 25 or so, and it was a small percentage of my income. I was a graduate student, making a pittance, but some of the elders in the congregation I was part of talked about growing that percentage year by year. I didn't get to a tithe for quite a long time, but it was a very helpful marker for me to grow the

percentage each year, and I began to see connections in other parts of life. When the Millennium Development Goals emerged in 2000, suddenly the idea that benchmarks and timelines might help us be faithful stewards of the entire global household made enormous sense. By setting goals and measuring our progress, we have together reduced the worst of the world's poverty by more than half, and we're still making progress. Enormous change happens through small steps.

I moved past the traditional tithe a number of years ago, and the greater gift has been the joy that comes with loving neighbors I may never meet. Giving is a blessing that keeps on giving dividends – the joy and thanksgiving keep growing. I encourage you to take a step or two up the mountain and see how your view of the world expands. Often our hearts start the journey, as we begin to see strangers as neighbors. Like the heart of God, the household we steward is more than we imagine – and so is the blessing that comes in caring for that household, and loving an expanding set of neighbors.

We're here to love God with all we are and all we have, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Take another step up the mountain and find a wider view.

Welcome a stranger or an outcast, and find your heart expanded – and filled. ^{Step up your giving this year, and you will find} The [^]return on investment is cosmic and eternal. ~~It is~~ God's kingdom ^{is} ^{ing} coming on earth as it is in heaven.