



Rooted Humility:

A New Vision of Stewardship

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In his book, *God the Economist*, M. Douglas Meeks writes about an understanding of stewardship that I find transformative.

With a little bit of wordplay, he points out the origins of the word “economy.” The word derives from two Greek words, *oikos* and *nomos*: household and law, or rule. An economy is a set of rules and laws that govern how the household lives and thrives.

In God’s economy, we are one family, one household. God imagines a world in which we are all intimately connected.

Psalm 24 declares this about the household rules within this family of interconnected peoples:

“The Earth is the lord’s and the fullness thereof.” That is the root of what we call the economy, the household rules, of God.

All that we see is God’s handiwork, and we are but stewards of those resources.

About that—about stewardship: Meeks goes on to remind us that our word “steward” derives from the Middle English term, “Sty-ward.” The steward, or sty-ward, was the one with the responsibility of taking care of the pig-sty so the livestock wouldn’t die.

A steward is a caretaker of things that belong to others, taking on the responsibility of assuring that, because of their care, others eat and live and thrive. It is the role of a humble servant responsible to others and not one in possession of things.

There is a new stewardship being called for, and it begins with two fundamental notions: all things belong to God, and we are no more than stewards of, not possessors of, the “all things that belong to God.”

Luke T. Johnson put it this way: “Whatever you possess that somebody else needs already belongs to them.” I read that on a UCC stewardship poster in my first year of ministry, 1988. I have never forgotten it.

It reminds me of that passage in Micah. After writing about the vision God has for a peaceful world, where nations unlearn the way of war and beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks, Micah adds this: “And they shall all sit, each under their own vine and their own fig – and no one will make them afraid.” (Micah 4:4)



God’s vision of peace begins with stewards of God’s creation knowing not only that God will provide, and then further trusting that what God will provide is enough, but then also realizing that being satisfied with enough is the real pathway to peace and shalom.

A new stewardship understands that in God’s household, all are valued as equals.

A new stewardship believes that all will share in the wealth created for the household.

A new stewardship understands that enough is enough.

A new stewardship recognizes the agency of those who are marginalized in a world where avarice and greed and acquisitiveness create massive inequality. We are not so much giving to others, or doing for others, as we are participating in the justice they have a right to claim as their own.

A new stewardship begins with a rooted humility that knows that anything I claim ownership of and share with another is less an act of benevolence as it is a re-ordering of the household to align with the economy—the house rules—of God.

A new stewardship understands the need for and the role of accompaniment models that build relationships. The old colonial models that assume power over the poor even, if not especially, when they are targeted with your largesse, are fast becoming a thing of the past.

A new stewardship rewrites the rules of the house and recognizes mutuality and partnership and agency in those who have been forced to live in the margins.

We all have the capacity to be good stewards.

There are three important things that this new stewardship is going to ask of us that could be hard for us to learn. It will require an equally harder set of practices we have to unlearn.

First, we have to let go of the notion that we are giving things away to help others.

We are merely participating in the right-sizing of an economy that God has established that asks us to be happy with enough and then work to ensure that all have enough.

“Whatever you possess that somebody else needs already belongs to them.”

Second, we have to let go of the notion that when we possess something and give it to another, we get to decide what happens to it.

Recognizing the agency of those whom we in the west have marginalized while we amassed our wealth in ways that ensured not all would have enough—that that is at the root of this new stewardship. We accompany those who suffer unjustly in mutual agency as they articulate their pathways to fullness of life and engage in their rightful pursuit of happiness.

Third, and perhaps the most difficult for many of us, is the role we are going to learn to accept when we become the recipients of gifts that those whom we accompany on their journey to wholeness and happiness share with us. We like to be the givers of gifts, and to feel the satisfaction that comes with the power found in giving to another. But this new stewardship sees those whom we have placed in the margins not just as objects of our beneficence, but also as stewards themselves of gifts our happy lives are incomplete without. Only here, at this juncture, are we truly equal in the household of God.

Let us all pray for a reawakening to our role as “sty-wards.” Let us all embrace the economy of a God who has seen fit to give us all we need. Let our hungers be satisfied by the vine and fig God has provided. And let us embrace the whole world as sibling and steward alike—a family of mutual love and affection each willing to care for the other and never fully satisfied until all have just enough.

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