

HOMILY

By Sandra Swan for the CPG Trustee Meeting, November 18, 2010

I've been thinking a lot about the concept of responsibility lately. Being a trustee of CPF is, of course, a huge responsibility, and one that I know we all take very seriously. But that isn't the responsibility that I've been pondering.

I was reminded of this the other evening when my 13-year-old grandson Brian had a responsibility dilemma. A classmate of his, Bob, had posted on Facebook a picture of a hippopotamus with the phrase "Francis is a hippo" – Francis being another classmate. Brian had laughed and posted a "thumbs up" sign on the Facebook page before he realized that he was participating in what his school would consider a bullying activity. Brian could get kicked out of school for his action, which he quickly rescinded, but the Facebook page was still there. Brian's dilemma was this: should he snitch on his friend who posted the page – hurting that friend - or should he remain silent – thereby hurting Francis. Either way, one of those boys was going to be hurt by Brian's action. This gave me a good chance to talk with Brian about sins of omission and commission, and in the end, he decided to snitch – to tell the school what Bob had done.

Now what does this have to do with the reading today, you ask? Well, I believe that we in the church face an equal dilemma about responsibility. Let me explain.

When we talk about stewardship we turn again and again to the parable of the stewards. But I think sometimes we miss a subtle point of that parable. ALL THREE of the stewards took care of the master's property. All three returned to the master what they had been given, and returned the talent in good condition, even the one that had been buried.

But the master wasn't satisfied with the servant having taken care of the property – the servant was to USE the property to increase its value. The servant was to be proactive – to be creative and energetic.

We sometimes say that as stewards, as trustees, we are to "take care of things." But we are called to do more. We are called to be creative and energetic and work to increase... the common good, the value of what we have been given, knowledge. The good steward was rewarded for his increasing the value of the master's asset.

This is the period of Stewardship Campaigns in our churches across the country. I have a quibble with the use of the words Stewardship and Campaign in this context. In the first place, we distort the meaning of Stewardship when we limit its meaning to that of a pledge card. Stewardship is a much larger, more embracing word than filling out a pledge card so the church can balance its budget next year. Stewardship is a lot more than paying bills, but we too often talk of Stewardship Campaigns in terms of the church's upcoming budget.

Or we soften the message so much that the person in the pew thinks the Stewardship Campaign is all about generosity and gratefulness, not giving.

Worse, we talk about a campaign. Stewardship is not a campaign. It is not a once-a-year event. It is not about getting to a goal. It is not about tithing or proportional giving, or generosity. It is about caring for God's creation in every way, always, and working to make right whatever is now wrong in God's world.

But worst of all, we are afraid to confront those who are not participating. We hedge and let people off the hook by implying that their support of their church family is an option, not an

obligation. Are we so afraid that we might offend? Are we so afraid that if we point out that they are part of the church family, and they have a responsibility (there's that word again) to the good of the whole, that they might walk away?

Where is our responsibility in this matter? Do we believe that every member of the Church body has a responsibility to be a participant, and not a partaker only?

Paul certainly thought so. Remember the Epistle from last Sunday's lessons? Thessalonians 3, starting with verse 6, but condensing it a bit:

Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. For even when we were with you we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. Take note of those who do not obey what we say in this letter; have nothing to do with them.... Do not regard them as enemies, but warn them as believers.

So all believers have the responsibility to "work" – to actively participate in being good stewards, advancing God's kingdom. And that means the responsibility to support the work of the church. People who are passive – who attend church, expect it to be there for baptisms and weddings and funerals – but who do not "work" to support the church are partakers, not participants.

And note that it is our responsibility to "warn" them. Paul even suggests that we have nothing to do with them – to shun them.

But what do we do instead? We suggest that their support of the church – their "work" - is purely voluntary and we will love you just as much and welcome you just as much whether you participate or just partake.

What are we afraid of? That they will leave if their responsibility is pointed out to them? That we won't be behaving as "Christians" if we call people to their obligation? That we are afraid someone will be mad at us?

So here is our dilemma. Someone we know is a partaker only, not a participant. In this case, doesn't support the work of the church by financial support. According to Paul, that person has done something wrong. And by not fulfilling a believer's obligation, that person is harming the entire church community by limiting the work that it can undertake.

Do we "snitch" on that person, confronting them and pointing out their fault of not fully participating, thereby hurting their feelings and perhaps losing them as partakers in our church community? Or do we let them go and know that the entire community is hurt? The one who does not participate exploits the work of those who do – and Paul warned about that in an earlier passage in Thessalonians.

Paul would tell us to have nothing to do with them, and to warn them. Do we have the courage to do that? Is it our responsibility, our responsibility as stewards?

So we need to rethink that concept "stewardship" and the way we use it and teach about it. We need to be explicit that we expect (not invite) every member to work (provide financial support) and if they don't work, according to Paul, they don't eat. We've been wimps in being afraid to tell the truth about our responsibility as members of Christ's church - as stewards. I'm still working this out in my own mind, but I should warn you that I am going to continue to push the church to ditch the term "Stewardship Campaign" (I don't know yet what to call it – suggestions are welcome).

As Stewards, as Trustees, we have a personal responsibility to not only take care of God's creation, and to work for justice and peace, but we are also to confront people who are not doing their part. When we let them off the hook, we are not being good stewards. We are allowing them to exploit the work of others. We are allowing them to partake without participating.