

10.04.26 ~ Pentecost 19
“Celebrating Stewardship Blessings”
The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Words of Stewardship

Leviticus 23:33-36, 39-43 ^{TLB}

Pew Bible 105, 106

³³⁻³⁴ “*The Festival of Shelters*: Five days later, on the last day of September, is the Festival of Shelters to be celebrated before the Lord for seven days. ³⁵ On the first day there will be a sacred assembly of all the people; don’t do any hard work that day. ³⁶ On each of the seven days of the festival you are to sacrifice an offering by fire to the Lord. The eighth day requires another sacred convocation of all the people, at which time there will again be an offering by fire to the Lord. It is the closing assembly, and no regular work is permitted.

³⁹ “This last day of September, at the end of your harvesting, is the time to begin to celebrate this seven-day festival before the Lord. Remember that the first and last days of the festival are special days of rest. ⁴⁰ On the first day, take boughs of fruit trees laden with fruit, and palm fronds, and the boughs of leafy trees—such as willows that grow by the brooks—and build shelters with them, rejoicing before the Lord your God for seven days. ⁴¹ This seven-day annual feast is a law from generation to generation. ⁴² During those seven days, all of you who are native Israelites are to live in these shelters. ⁴³ The purpose of this is to remind the people of Israel, generation after generation, that I rescued you from Egypt, and caused you to live in shelters. I am Jehovah your God.”

Leader: These Are God’s Words. People: Thanks be to God!

Words of Instruction

Luke 12:42-48 ^{NIV}

Pew Bible 906

⁴² The Lord answered, “Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? ⁴³ It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns. ⁴⁴ Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. ⁴⁵ But suppose the servant says to himself, ‘My master is taking a long time in coming,’ and he then begins to beat the other servants, both men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk. ⁴⁶ The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers.

⁴⁷ “The servant who knows the master’s will and does not get ready or does not do what the master wants will be beaten with many blows. ⁴⁸ But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

Leader: These Are Jesus’ Words. People: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Oh, generous God, we come this Sunday to worship and learn something new about our faith and stewardship. We thank you for the opportunity to have had a full week of living, working, volunteering, mourning, and rejoicing. You bless us with many gifts and responsibilities. We ask for the insight to appreciate and fulfill them to the best of our ability. Help us to make more time to study and apply your word throughout the week. Open our minds to creative resources and open our mouths to invite others to know you and to meet you here. Speak through this message and messenger. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Many people cringe when they hear a sermon is coming on Leviticus; a little like they do if a sermon is on stewardship! Bear with me though, because no matter how many you have heard or read, it is good to receive and occasionally review correct instruction and also to celebrate the countless blessings showered upon us by our merciful and generous God. Not sure about your perspective, but I keep being blessed and feel God's love even when I know that I have not earned it or deserve some of those blessings. And then, don't we continue to ask him for more? Aren't our prayers of petition ongoing for self and others? That's not a bad thing if we also demonstrate our gratitude once in a while other than just on thanksgiving. So, let us see how the Israelites appreciated their blessings.

The first twenty-two chapters of Leviticus are basically a Rules Book about living, worship, sacrifices, relationships, cleanliness, and more. That may be the reason we hate to read so many details and guidelines; it's like studying our bylaws or the printed *Congressional Record* (a lot of legislative law numbers, amendments, "herewiths," "therefores," and "furthermores"). But the subtle truth is that the whole book of Leviticus was more of what God communicated to Moses on Mt. Sinai about his covenant with his people, the Israelites. The so-called rules were God's expectations from his people whom he had saved and

would continue to protect from Pharaoh's slavery, lifestyle of debauchery, and physical cruelty.

Chapter 23 goes on to reserve the people's calendars and instill life rhythms that would create time with God: Sabbaths each week, Passover, Special Feasts, Festivals, and special days each year. For today, we learn about the Feast of Tabernacles, the final and most important feast of the year, lasting seven (7) days from the 15th through the 21st of the seventh (7th) month of their calendar year. For us it would be October, the tenth (10th) month. The Feast of Tabernacles celebrated the grape and olive Fall harvest as a reminder that God protected them by providing manna and quail during their 40-year wilderness journey through Egypt toward the promised land of Canaan. How appropriate that David selected for our vocal ensemble to sing "From Generation to Generation." We too must remember our generations of blessings.

During their pilgrimage journey, as nomads sleeping in portable tents, how did they worship? Did they have a temple yet? No. So do you remember last week's other words for Tabernacle? Tents of Meeting, a Tent of Testimony, Sanctuary, Temple, Worship Center, to name a few. Last Sunday we spoke of decorating the tabernacle, revering it as the place to meet God. Yesterday at Clara Reynolds' Celebration of Life service at National Memorial Funeral Home's chapel, a simple room was turned into a sanctuary with flowers, photographs, a podium, food demonstrating her gifts of hospitality, tables and chairs, and the people who loved her, but even more than that, the words spoken of her faith and family transformed the gathering into a sacred "House of Mourning" the pastor said. But I found it to be a "House of Prayer and Healing," where

all present met God's presence in the music and words spoken. You could see the tangible fullness of God's love reciprocated in the dozens of family photos of Clara at Debbie and Ken's home with her grandchildren and great grandchildren on her lap or surrounding her with joy and love. That home was a tabernacle of sorts, and there are many such places beyond this building where God is present daily if we pay attention or invite him there.

Back to our studies this week, the Feast of Tabernacles required a sacred assembly with no work scheduled, where the people would bring in their best free will offerings like the choicest fruits or best animals, not obligatory ones to fulfill their rule or the Levitical laws. Palm fronds and the best green tree branches were used to build the booths, and the booths were to remind them symbolically of their nomadic tents of the past. In our world, do we celebrate God's blessings with the best offerings or with what's left over? Do we use our funds to repair or refresh the tabernacle we use for worship? Who gets paid first? Ourselves, our bills, or God's kingdom? This is not a guilt/shame question, but I pose it to make you think, pray, and discern how do I best show God my gratitude? Do we see our budgetary guidelines as a limit of spending, or can we imagine many more people here and a larger mission/ministry budget model perhaps? Remember, your giving could be time, talents, or tithes. Perhaps you give all three to kingdom work, here at the church or elsewhere; celebrate your ability to do that, especially in today's economy.

Jesus' response in our passage in Luke was not specifically about money but more about preparation. Earlier in chapter 12, he taught a parable about the man with so much grain he couldn't store it all. That

should be a wake-up call for us too; we all have more stuff than we need, and we cannot take it with us when we die. But Peter asked if Jesus' teachings were for the disciples only or for everyone. Jesus did not answer directly, but he spoke of the nation's leaders and their unhealthy focus on accumulation and achievement. Jesus subtly teaches that they should be caring for the poor and more for their nation than their own leadership positions. Unbelievers and the faithless would have to atone and explain at the second coming of Jesus.

No one seems to be ready for his coming! That could be said today for sure. Jesus is trying to get them to be prepared; what does that mean for you? This summer, we learned it meant to be in right relationship with Jesus, his word, and the triune God. Have you made changes in your life to be received by him at the end of this life? It's not about being perfect, but about being content and at peace with your faith relationship and your gifts of generosity to advance the Kingdom. His example of slave and master are good; husband and wife or homeowner and guest metaphors would work too. How many of our households are ready for unexpected guests? My mother (who did not work full time outside the house) always was, but alas, I am not. I scramble at home if I know someone is coming. This illustration spoke to me and our church. I run around here on Thursdays to be sure we are ready for the coming weekend events on the calendar and Sunday worship. But I also celebrate the blessings God has showered upon us having this facility; others are amazed at this church and mission center. Are we grateful for the resources and people they bring to our doors? I had many wonderful conversations with the Kohaku audience members, including the Pastor of the Washington Japanese

Christian Church and a Bible Study leader from McLean Bible Church who both have three to five members who sing with Kohaku. God is working through us in mysterious ways!

One way to be ready is to celebrate our blessings frequently: our relationships, income, and our ability to be faithful givers and followers of Christ, our time, talents, and tithes. Are we grateful? As a church, before we consider our budget November 1st, let us celebrate all God is doing here at United: all the missions we serve, like the CROP Walk to stamp out hunger; the New United Gospel Food Mission and giveaway; Baileys and RPC community shelters; Arch Home Care, helping families and senior adults cope with aging at home or serious illness recovery; the Shepherd's Center; Toastmasters; the joy of music with Kohaku, Sopranessence, and our three churches (UBC, NBMBC, VGBC); our new George Mason Friends of the Library; ACCA; FACETS; Associations like CBF, MACBF, BGAV, BWIM, Baptist Joint Committee, Baptist World Alliance, NorthStar Church Network; and more who serve the community to unite and bring God's blessings to more people. Are we ready for Jesus? Let us celebrate all he is doing here! Amen? Amen! ||

Please pray with me: Thank you Lord for the guidance you give us through your Scriptures each week. May we never forget that you have called us into relationship first, service second, and glory last. Help us to stay close to your word and your workers. Transform our hearts, Lord, to embolden our love and generosity, sharing your blessing with others every day. May we provide encouragement and resources to others as you bless us. Keep our eyes upon you and your mission; guide our steps. We celebrate you and your sacrifice for our sins as we remember both the cross and resurrection through communion. I pray these things in Jesus' name, Amen.