

STEWARDSHIP AND CHARACTER: UPSIDE DOWN AND BACKWARDS
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It took me a while to learn how to use our fax machine. I knew you had to place the message you were faxing a certain way. I just couldn't remember which way. Finally, someone said "it's upside down and backwards the opposite of what you'd expect."

If you put your message rightside up and forward the message will go out blank. But if you do it upside down and backwards you can send a perfect facsimile to anyone on the planet.

Now, when I want to send a message and find myself standing in front of the fax machine, I always say to myself, "upside down and backwards."

In today's story from Luke Jesus says that's how we are called to live the life of faith. Upside down and backwards. Just the opposite of how the world tells us to live.

Jesus should have asked the crowd to stand on their heads when he taught them the beatitudes, says one preacher, because that was what he was doing. He was turning the known world upside down. Those who had been fighting for breath at the bottom of the human heap suddenly found themselves closest to heaven. While those who thought they were on top of things found themselves on their backs looking up.

Beatitudes were common in Jesus' day, 'blessed are the wise for they shall not be fooled,' 'blessed are they who have invested well, for their old age shall be secure.' What *was* different was not the form but the content of Jesus' beatitudes. Blessed are the hungry and thirsty, blessed are those who are persecuted and mourn. Blessed are those, says Jesus, who are pushovers, victims, dreamers, and fools. *They* are the chosen ones. *They* shall see God face to face. *They* shall be happy and lucky and satisfied not because they got an advanced copy of the rules and played by them in order to win but because winning was the farthest thing from their minds.ⁱ

I begin here this All Saints Day, the second Sunday of our Stewardship season because what we remember and celebrate today about our loved ones and all of those from every age who have joined the great company of heaven – what we remember and celebrate, is the way they lived their lives with courage and faith, upside down and backwards.

Yet, I also want to continue our discussion of stewardship that began last week with Doug King's excellent sermon. I want to put the act of giving in context. When stewardship season rolls around our tendency is to just think money. Make a pledge, write a check, sell some stock.

But the act of pledging is the tip of the iceberg. When we make a pledge for the work of Jesus Christ it is much more than a pledge. It signals a larger reality. It is a reflection of how we approach the whole of life. Everything we have belongs to God. That is the message of stewardship. Every breath we take. Every minute we live. Every-thing belongs to God. Stewardship and All Saints are about how we reflect that in our living.

Today and over the coming weeks I want to talk with you about living with character. Nearly every one of St. Paul's letters deals with character. What I mean by character are the 'essential qualities' as Webster's says that guide our living and our giving. The values and traits that comprise the larger reality of which our pledging is but the tip.

We are living in a time of testing for our church and city and nation. Who ever thought that driving over a landmark bridge or opening mail would constitute an act of bravery? This is why character is so important today: we live in a time when we may be tempted to choose the familiar and comfortable and easy.

Rather than challenging our complacency and fear.

When everything is going fine it is not hard to live with character.

But when the World Trade Centers are destroyed one day and threats of imminent attack or biological terrorism are made everyday then we have an opportunity to find out what we are made of. An opportunity to discover our character. I said in my stewardship letter to you ten days ago the terrorists knew they could not destroy our military so what they are counting on is destroying our character, our will.

There's a wonderful story that illustrates what I am talking about. It is about a little girl who was visiting her grandfather to see the eggs he was hatching in an incubator.

As she was watching, she noticed one particular egg in which something was trying to break out from the inside. The baby chick finally got a few pieces of that hard shell dislodged. She could see every time the tiny chick worked on that shell it fell back exhausted. Then it would start all over again pecking away. Then it would collapse like before. So wanting to help that little chick she reached in and gently broke the eggshell apart so the poor chick didn't have to work so hard. But you know what happened when that chick didn't have to struggle? It died. Mother Nature has designed the eggshell hard enough and thick enough so that a chick will develop strength enough to survive when it finally breaks through.

St. Paul says in his letter to the Romans – during a dark time for Christians in the Roman Empire – he says “suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us.” We are living in extraordinarily difficult times. But I believe, whatever your struggle is, these are times that are providing an opportunity for you and me to strengthen our faith. Times that will give birth to a new and stronger nation and people and Westminster.

When those early believers were facing the hardness of the Roman Empire their struggle produced courage. When we hear threats of terrorist attacks or an anemic economy we search for courage. When you try to go on after a loved one has died you need courage.

I love that story, a true story, about a student at Rice University. Came to take the final exam. It had but one question. Everybody starts writing feverishly. This kid takes out her pen, scribbles something into her blue book, walks up to the professor thirty seconds later, winks, drops the blue book in front of the prof and walks out of the room. Test comes back. Kid gets an A+. The question on the test was “What is courage?” To which the student responded, “This is.”ⁱⁱ

That student wasn't defining courage. She was living courage. What a creative way to take a final exam in philosophy. Three cheers for the professor. My hunch is that professor was inspired by that student. If I took that exam I would have filled every page explaining courage, describing courage. But *living courage* is another thing.

Did you ever get the feeling you spend more time explaining and describing your character values, your principles than you do living them? Do you practice what you preach? Sure we say you have to be true to yourself and go against the grain, live with courage, reject what is expected and easy. But does our checkbook reflect that? Do our relationships and parenting and conduct in our workplace reveal our inner convictions?

Someone said at the end of our lives when we finally know in our heart of hearts the meaning of the old prayer, "O Lord, let me know my end and number of my days, that I may learn how fleeting life is" at the end of life when we know the meaning of that prayer, it's not the successes we long to go back and re-live. It is the failures we long to relive. The occasions we remained silent rather than speaking out. The times we told our children one thing and did another. The personal resolutions we made to be more disciplined or loving or faithful.

I'll never forget one afternoon, long ago when I was in grade school playing with some friends in a local park. A bully rode up on his bicycle with some of his friends and started pushing around one of my friends. Then he punched my friend in the nose. My memory always concludes with me standing there. Watching. Doing nothing. Ah, to relive our failures. The times we were timid or played it safe.

What does it mean to live with character? With courage? Graham Greene's hero in *The Power and The Glory* is a seedy, alcoholic priest who after months as a fugitive is finally caught by the revolutionary government in Mexico and condemned to be shot. On the evening before his execution, he sits in his cell and thinks back over what seems to him the dingy failure of his life.

Tears poured down his face, he was not at that moment afraid of damnation. Even the fear of pain was in the background, says Greene. He felt only an immense disappointment because he had to go to God empty-handed, with nothing done at all. It seemed to him at that moment it would have been quite easy to have been a saint. It would only have needed a little self-restraint here, a little courage there. He felt like someone who had missed happiness by seconds at an appointed place. He knew now that at the end there was only one thing that counted – to be a saint.

Mark Twain said the same thing. With characteristic brevity and searing wit that great American writer said this, he said "once I could remember anything whether it happened or not. Now I can remember only those things that didn't happen." Ah, to relive the failures of our lives.

To correct the things that didn't happen. To be a saint.ⁱⁱⁱ

The technical definition of a saint is anyone who is baptized – living or among the company of heaven. But there's another definition, the more common usage of the word, that defines a saint as "a holy or godly person. One of God's chosen people."

Frankly, that's the definition I like. It describes the character of a saint.
It points to the kind of people our church and nation needs right now.

Initially I felt some reticence when I thought of combining the theme of stewardship on All Saints Sunday. Talking about money on a day when we are remembering and praying for our loved ones who have died.

But, you see, it goes much deeper than that doesn't it! What we give goes to the core of our character as followers of Jesus. If there was ever a time our city and nation needed strong churches, churches with character, churches with saints – that time is now.

I can't think of a better way to be a saint and to honor the saints today than with your bold pledge of time and talent and treasure for the work of Jesus Christ. Amen.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, Gospel Medicine (Cambridge: Cowley Press, 1995) 146.

ⁱⁱ John Galloway, pastor Wayne Presbyterian Church, sermon preached 10/21/01, audio cassette.

ⁱⁱⁱ William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, October/November/December 2001, 21.