

Habits of the Heart

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“Jesus, in Matthew’s Gospel, calls us to pray, to fast, and to give alms: ‘when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites... when you fast do not look gloomy... when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.’” So goes one of the opening paragraphs of my local United Methodist Church’s Lenten devotional: *Return to God: Lenten Spiritual Reader and Guide*. It is a beautiful collection of scripture, prayers, illustrations, poetry and prose designed to draw us into the mystery of Lent, a guide to “penitential practices and habits of the heart.”

It’s the phrase, “habits of the heart,” that captures my imagination.

That’s what comprehensive Christian stewardship is, a habit of the heart. Many of us confuse stewardship with fundraising or limit it to our financial commitment to the church. It is tempting to segregate stewardship from daily living. It is tempting to think of stewardship as something we do when we write the check on Sunday morning instead of approaching stewardship as a way of life.

Remember back to when you joined your local United Methodist Church. Your pastor probably asked you an important question. It is on page 38 of the United Methodist Hymnal: “As members of this congregation, will you faithfully participate in its ministries by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, and your service?” Your answer was “I will.” Now there’s a habit of the heart if I ever heard one.

Notice the third-to-last word of that important question. It’s “and,” not “or.” That simple, seemingly unimportant word makes all the difference. By answering “I will” we commit ourselves to the kingdom of God through the mission and ministry of our church by our prayer life, by our participation in corporate worship, by our financial support, and by our service, wherever that occurs – on the job, at school, at church. When we practice the heart-habit of true comprehensive Christian stewardship, our every choice, every action, every word reflects our belonging to God through Jesus Christ.

You’ve heard people say, “I’m giving up chocolate (or coffee or ice cream or cigarettes or swearing or fill-in-the-blank) for Lent.” Those are usually temporary fixes that resume on Easter Monday. Instead of what we won’t do, may all of us begin the journey toward what we will do – a habit of the heart that results in fuller service and fuller living in response to the grace of God, who has given us all that we are and all that we have.

As the stewardship voice of the Florida Conference, the Foundation is ready to help you, your family and your church with anything related to comprehensive Christian stewardship. Please call, click or write us at 1-800-282-8011, extension 106; www.fumf.org; or PO Box 3767, Lakeland, FL 33802.