

**THE MESSAGE for Sept 11, 2011**  
**Genesis 12:1-3 & Matthew 18:21-35**  
*Blessed to be a Blessing*  
**The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller**

Bill and Betty were standing on the back deck of their house with their four children and 7 grandchildren looking over the valley as the sun was setting. Taking it all in, Bill blurted out, “I am blessed! Why do I have so much?” After a few moments of silence, Betty wisely responded, “I think the more important question is, ‘What do we do with what we have?’”

Two great questions for us to ponder here in the Lebanon Valley after the biblical flooding we experienced this past week.

1. Why do I have so much?
2. What do we do with what we have?

Wow! What a week we’ve had with nearly 8 inches of rain in 48 hours. I’ve noticed that people responded in two ways to all this rain and flooding? It seems to have brought out the best and the worst in people. Have you noticed?

I was talking with a guy who said, “Maybe I should sue the electric company for not getting the power back on fast enough. My sump pump quit working, which caused my basement to flood. I lost a lot of stuff.” He was furious.

I was talking with another guy who said, “We are so blessed. We got about a foot of water in our basement. I had to throw everything out. I’ve wanted to get rid of that stuff for a long time now. God just hurried me along.” He was content.

On Friday afternoon I went for a bike ride. I needed some exercise. I hadn’t been out all week because of the rain. I rode over into Lebanon, went across 14<sup>th</sup> street to 897, I was getting tired so I decided to cut across Iona and head back home. Uh, Oh... That was not a smart move... I was riding on Iona Road and I could see up ahead the road was flooded – the length of a football field. I was thinking – well I rode through some water before; maybe I’ll just ride through this.

As I got closer to the water cars passed me, stopped at the waters edge, turned around, and went the other way. I’m thinking what should I do? I’m having this conversation with God, believe it or not, and God sends a servant in a blue four-wheel-drive pickup truck who pulled up beside me and said, “Do you want a lift to the other side? Hop in the back.” I did and he did. The water was nearly 2 feet deep in the middle. What a blessing that young man was. I don’t know who he was or what his name was, I just know he was a servant of the Lord at the right place at the right time in my life.

So I decided to keep going. I made my way north on Prescott riding through some flood water on the way near the Kreider farm. They had water everywhere – keep them in your prayers. I rode through three inches of water right in front of their farm.

I made my way over to the intersection of King and Prescott. That wasn't a smart move either. By this time I just want to get home – I'm tired. There were generators pumping water out of the basement of 5 or 6 houses along King Street. There was major flooding there. To the right King Street was closed to all traffic, the neighbors told me. The road was under nearly four feet water. Prescott straight ahead leading to 422, the way I wanted to go, was flooded with nearly two feet of water. They said the best thing for you to do is to ride back into Lebanon and take East Street over to 422. I put an extra five miles on my ride. It was not something I wanted to do.

But I took some time to talk with the people who live there at the intersection of Prescott and King. They told me that the houses along King Street all had at least a foot of water on the first floor. The basements were completely submerged. It was incredible. I couldn't believe it. And then with a glow about them both, they said – “But we are all working together to help each other out.” We are all working together to help each other out. I was amazed.

By the way we owe a huge “Thank You” to all the Fire and emergency personnel in our area... I don't know if you've heard the sirens? They have been relentless in helping people out. I'm asking you to send a card or letter or email or facebook or a carrier pigeon... from the people of Friedens Lutheran Church. Sign it, “Thank you for helping people out.” They truly are a blessing to us.

Back to Bill's question, “Why do I have so much?” Why do we have anything at all?

Everyone would probably answer that question differently. Some might say it's just fate. Or life's a lottery, and I happen to hit it big. Or others might say they have what they have because they worked hard for it. They've earned it. No pain, no gain.

As Christian we are called to respond a little differently. As Christians we are called to believe that everything we have (and everything we are) is a gift from God - a blessing from God. That changes our perspective on everything. We are called to believe that the abundance in our lives – not just our physical stuff, but the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food on our tables, the beauty of a sunset, our very own lives – all gifts. God's blessings poured into our lives in abundant ways because of God's goodness.

I truly enjoy riding my bike out on the country roads. That's my God time. I've said more prayers, solved more problems, written more sermons, did more work while riding my bike than I could ever do in the office.

I love biking especially this time of year. The farmer's fields are abundant with the harvest. I am amazed at the acres and acres of corn and soybean (okay those that aren't under water right now). Now -- I realize that the farmers worked very hard tending those fields, but I also realize that ultimately only God can make the crops grow, and the rich abundance of God blessings are all around us in the fields.

There's a word for this perspective. It's called stewardship. Now I know that for many people the word "stewardship" leaves an icky taste in their mouths. Kind of like the moldy, musty taste after being in a dark, damp basement. Stewardship is like that for some people. I want to take that taste out of your mouth when it comes to stewardship. I also know that stewardship is often associated with pressure or guilt or pastor's who work hard to separate you from your money. I am not about that. I want to offer you a different approach.

Consider this: A steward is someone who has responsibility of someone else's stuff. A steward is a manager tending to the things that belong to the owner. The steward doesn't own those things the owner owns those things. The steward simply cares for the things that belong to someone else.

I love to borrow tools from my neighbor. He may not be so happy to lend them to me. If I don't have a tool, I go to my neighbor and he lets me borrow them especially his compressor. Oh... I love that compressor. But I treat that compressor very differently because it's not mine. That's the approach of a steward. Everything we have is not ours. Nothing we have is ours. It all belongs to God. Say that with me – *It all belongs to God.*

God is the owner of everything. And if God is the owner of everything then we are God's stewards. We are privileged to be the managers of everything that God has placed in our care.

Take a moment and ask the question – "Why do I have so much?" Our response is, "Because God has blessed us. Everything we have and everything we are is a blessing from God." It's like the words of the doxology – which we are going to sing in a few minutes – "Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise him all creatures here below. Praise him above ye heavenly host. Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."

We often associate stewardship with money and only money. It includes money, but is it so much more than that. In our consumer culture we often focus on what we don't have, and it leaves us discontent and we want more and more and more and our hunger and thirst is never satisfied.

With the stewardship approach to life we pause – we hit the pause button of life and focus on what God has already given us, what God has already placed in our care, trusting that God continues to provide. A stewardship approach realizes that we don't need more, we need to consider what we already have. And stewardship approach offers us contentment that grows in our hearts and our minds and it produces a harvest of gratefulness for what we have already.

Take a moment and consider the abundance in your life right now: family, friends, faith, health, laughter, music, love... a community of faith -- not to mention our cars and homes, and all the stuff that gets flooded in our basements.

Stewardship points us to God's incredible abundance and graciousness. It answers the question, "Why do I have so much?" Because God has blessed me, God chooses to bless us abundantly.

That's what we learn from our first reading in Genesis this morning. God tells Abram, "I'm going to bless you so that you might be a blessing to others." And God does. And Abram does. We are blessed because Abraham was willing to accept God's blessing and be a blessing to others...

**(Read Genesis 12:1-3)**

Blessed to be a blessing. That's how God is calling us. That's how God is equipping us. That's how God is empowering us to live our lives. We are a gift to the world.

Jesus once said, "To whom much is given, much is required," with eyes of stewardship we can see that we have been given much. We are truly blessed. God has freely given to us in abundance. We are blessed to be a blessing to others. Anything less is unacceptable. That's Jesus' point in today's parable about forgiveness. Listen to what Jesus says...

**(Read Matthew 18:21-35)**

The first servant owes a debt of 10,000 talents. One talent was worth about 20 year's pay for a day laborer. Translate that into today's currency, this first servant owes the king \$3,240,000,000. Just let that sink in for a minute - \$3,240,000,000. That's an astronomical amount of debt. Simply put, Jesus is using an extreme number to make an extreme point about forgiveness...

1. It shows the king's generosity. Doing something a king usually didn't do...
2. It shows the absolutely absurd offer of the servant to repay the king. He can never repay it in his lifetime...
3. It shows the shocking and stunning nature of the king who is willingness to forgive an incredible debt. That's generosity...

Now as the story unfolds the second servant owes the first servant 100 denarii, which today would equal about \$5,400. But the first servant is unwilling to forgive that debt. This story leaves me, I hope it leaves you, scratching our heads in wonder.

First, how it is possible that one who had been forgiven so great a debt could be so petty and so demanding for repayment of such a small debt from a fellow servant...

Second, how is it that the king was not interested so much in repayment, but in paying forward... The king blessed that first servant so that he might go and be a blessing to the second servant.

Forgiveness is an issue of stewardship. We've been blessed by God in so many ways to be a blessing to others. To forgive someone is truly a blessing. We are to be managers of God's forgiveness - WOW!

The human heart is an amazing thing. It's a great example of the stewardship lifestyle. God has made us to be like the human heart. The heart pumps blood in one valve and then sends it out through another valve. It never stores up blood for use later. The heart is constantly circulating throughout the body. It gets blood, then it gives blood. It receives, then gives! Receives, then gives!

If the heart stops receiving and giving – then you are no longer living...

This is how we are to live as disciples of Jesus. We receive from God, and then we give. It starts with God and flows through us to others.

- We love, because God first loved us.
- We give freely because we have freely received.
- We bless others because we have been blessed by God.
- We forgive because we have been forgiven.

Why do you have so much? Is it fate? Is it the result of your hard work? Or is it that you have been abundantly blessed by God? More importantly, what are you going to do with what you have received? Amen.