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Putting God First

By The Rev. J. Randolph Alexander, Jr.

When I ask a dear friend or family member to take care of something of value to me, I am paying them a high compliment. I am saying that I believe he or she will treat my property with the respect and care it deserves and then return it to me in good condition. In other words, I expect they will be good stewards of what I am leaving in their care.

The Christian tradition would say God is honoring us as stewards in entrusting us with the sacred gift of our life itself, and with countless other gifts, as well. In fact, both the Jewish and Muslim traditions also agree on this point. Contrary to the modern secular notion of the self-made man or woman who is “the master of his or her fate: the captain of his or her soul” -- to quote loosely from the poem “Invictus” by William Ernest Henley -- the Christian faith teaches us that our lives are not our own: we belong to God, and God entrusts us to be stewards of this gift of life.

A vital aspect of being a good steward of this precious gift of life is regularly examining where our priorities truly lie. What do we both care and worry

about the most? What keeps us up at night? How do we define success, or failure, for that matter? How will we know when we have truly “arrived,” and what will ultimately make us happy?

Our ancient faith can help us here, as well. The very first of the Ten Commandments sets the tone: “You shall have no other gods besides me” (Exodus 20:3). The brilliant twentieth century theologian Paul Tillich wrote famously in his book *Dynamics of Faith*, that our “ultimate concern” in any given moment could be thought of as being our “god.” This could be so if this central concern, whatever it is, so dominates our thoughts, actions, and imaginations that it is central to our purpose in life and drowns out the possibility of true devotion to God.

Part of our Christian life, then, is regularly examining how we relate to everything in our lives that is not God. In the words from the Book of Common Prayer (p. 41) for the Confession of Sin from Morning Prayer Rite 1, the call is to be honest about those times when we have “followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.”

This is not to invite prudishness or to discourage the true joys of this life. It is, however, to say that our faith teaches us to enjoy all the blessings of life in their proper context. That is, they are always to be subordinate to our relationship with God. All else is passing away, after all.

This theme of the centrality of our relationship with God is reflected in this year’s theme of Immanuel’s Every Member Pledge Campaign – Putting God First. We all fall short in this overarching calling of putting God first in our lives. A central mission of the Christian community is always to remind us of where home is, in God, and to call us to refine and redefine our priorities.

Our calling to give back to God and to God’s great purposes, from all that we are and from all that God has given us, is truly the call to be good stewards. This is always in response to the great compliment God gives us first in entrusting us with innumerable precious gifts. May God help us grow into that stewardship.

In fact, we would do well to ponder the words of the Confession at Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer in the Book of Common Prayer:

Almighty and most merciful Father,
we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep,
we have followed too much the devices and desires of our
own hearts,
we have offended against thy holy laws,
we have left undone those things which we ought to
have done,
and we have done those things which we ought not to
have done.

But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us,
spare thou those who confess their faults,
restore thou those who are penitent,
according to thy promises declared unto mankind
in Christ Jesus our Lord;
and grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake,
that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life,
to the glory of thy holy Name. Amen.