

Stewards of Mysteries
1 Corinthians 4:1-5
February 19, 2023
First Presbyterian Luling

Some of you hold the position of household manager. Some of you have held that position before, and others of you split the position with someone else. The job description includes making sure members of the household are where they are supposed to be, when they are supposed to be there. This includes regularly scheduled events as well as one-time events, and the occasional spontaneous surprise event. Further items on the job description include making sure the household has the supplies they need, when they need them, in the appropriate amounts. Food, paper goods, electricity, water, gas and oil for the vehicles, toiletries, clothes...the list goes on and on. The more people in the household, the more complicated this position is.

I think enough of you have held this position that you have a pretty good handle on what it's like to manage a household. Now imagine what it would be like to manage an estate. The same basic tasks, but multiplied, and more complicated. Lots more people to watch over to make sure they are where they are supposed to be when they're supposed to be there. Lots more people to make sure are supplied with what they need, when they need it, in the amounts they need it.

Now imagine what it's like to manage an ancient estate. No google calendar, or even much paper to keep track of things. No sticky notes, which would doom me right from the start. No email, no phone calls, no HEB. This word manager is one that I'm using intentionally. It pops up from time to time in Jesus's parables about managers of estates, and it's the word that our version translates as "stewards" in today's passage. It has both this very concrete and literal meaning, of a person—in some cases paid, but in most cases an enslaved person—whose job it was to oversee the entire estate. Manage and distribute people and supplies in the most efficient and cost effective way for the owner of the estate or vineyard. Obviously a position that places a lot of responsibility on the manager, and a lot of trust in the manager on the part of the owner. A similar position today might be a ranch foreman, or a senior executive assistant—you know, the person that isn't the boss but really runs the place, someone like that.

Paul is using the manager term figuratively. And for whatever reason, it's translated as stewards instead of managers. A steward does the same thing as a manager, it's just a less familiar word for us. There might be a slight tinge of greater responsibility or care with a steward in comparison to a manager, but if there is, it's just a little bit, and I could be imagining a difference that really isn't there. Paul is referring to himself and Apollos, who we've now encountered three times. Apollos is another Christian leader, who apparently arrived in Corinth after Paul, and who has ministered among the Corinthian Christians. Paul has spent a bunch of time and words saying that he and Apollos aren't in opposition to each other, but working together.

Here he says they are "Servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries." He's making it clear, or trying to make it clear, that they are serving not the people of Corinth, and not their own egos, but Christ alone. He's trying to make it clear that they are humble servants who have taken on the responsibility of managing not God's household, but God's mysteries. Stewards of the mysteries of God.

Elsewhere in the letters, Paul uses "mysteries" several places to refer to different parts and pieces of the gospel. Essentially, "the mysteries of God" for Paul encompass the grace filled activity of God in sending Jesus to give salvation to both Jews and Gentiles. On a day like Transfiguration Sunday, when we read that mountaintop story of Jesus shining, well, we can just add that to the list of the mysteries of God.

Let me tell you that ministers love this phrase. Stewards of the mysteries of God. I'm pretty sure I've heard an ordination sermon on it. We like to think of ourselves this way. Stewards of the mysteries

of God. It has a poetry to it, and it makes us feel important. That's not wrong, but being a steward of the mysteries of God is in no way limited to religious leaders. In Presbyterian circles, and in Protestant circles generally, we believe in the priesthood of all believers, meaning that all believers have direct access to God and can share God's good news, God's mysteries, with anyone they meet. So we are all, you and me both, stewards of the mysteries of God.

We are stewards, managers of God's mysteries. Somehow we're in charge of making sure we have a good supply of God's mysteries and then distributing them to people who need them? Well, sort of. There's an abundant and infinite and eternal supply of God's mysteries, so that isn't a big difficulty. We are responsible for distributing them, in a sense. If we don't share God's love and mystery, then how will others know of them?

Part of the job of the steward, the household manager, is to be thinking of the household and its needs almost constantly. There's a mental version of the calendar and schedule. There's also a mental tally of what supplies are needed and what there's already a good supply of. The household manager never goes a day without thinking of the household and what its needs and plans are. That's precisely what I think we are supposed to do as stewards of God's mysteries. Never let a day go by without thinking of God's mysteries and how we might spread God's grace and love. Constantly keep the needs of God's household—the whole world—in mind. Forever be caring for God's household and tending the mysteries of God so that the people who need to hear them will.

We are answerable only to God for that. That's what Paul gets to in the closing verses of today's passage. He doesn't care if or how humans are judging his efforts. He is Christ's servant, a steward of God's mysteries, under God's judgment alone. That's a heavy thought.

We are servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Both a burden and a blessing.