

Living Well Together:
Stewardship as the Paradigm for Youth Ministry

by

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It was the night before I was to take my first group of young people to Confirmation camp as a rookie youth director. With anticipation mounting, I became consumed by a desire to purchase a pair of brightly colored sneakers before taking off the next day for 10 days in northern Minnesota with 75 junior-high-aged people. Rushing from store to store, feeling like I was on a game show to find the perfect pair of sneakers before the clock ran out (or the store closed), I finally landed on a pair of electric blueberry cross-trainers. They were awesome – just like the ones I had seen on countless 11 to 14 year-olds throughout the summer programming I was in charge of. My bags still weren't packed, I did not have enough gas in my tank to get me to church the next morning for our departure, and I had yet to set an out-of-office message for all of the emails I was sure to get while I was away; but hot dog, did I have cool shoes. I figured that my crew of young people would acknowledge my keen observation of adolescent style and would rave about how in touch with youth culture I was. I thought: "Maybe if they see me looking like them, they will feel like I am an adult worth relating to and consequently opening up to!" Besides, I felt cool because I was "keeping up with the junior highers'." Consumerism's seductive summons had lured me in, and I had completely missed the point of getting to spend a week in community with 75 beautifully made, uniquely suffering young people.

Not until taking *Money and the Mission of the Church* as an elective for my masters of arts study in Children, Youth, and Family Ministries at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota, did I realize that I needed to shift my way of thinking about relationships in a big way. This shift came about by thinking of relationships through stewardship. What I thought would be a class on budgeting and fundraising turned out to be a revelation on the way in which I tend to my various relationships. I learned that "stewardship" it is not a topic discussed one time a year

when it's time for parishioners to make their annual pledge to the church, as I had always imagined it to be. Rather, stewardship is really a way of life that Christians embark upon in community with one another. Stewardship as a way of Christian life together implies an understanding that God is the owner of everything we have and everything we are, which shapes how we care for our relationships and possessions. Those relationships and possessions from God are then our responsibility. That responsibility for relationships and possessions implores us to perpetually ask ourselves: What would God have me to do with these?¹ Mark Allan Powell, New Testament professor at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, defines this notion of stewardship as:

“Refer[ing] to what people who belong to God *do*: how they think, how they act, how they live ... [it's] the practice of faith through which people move from an awareness or acknowledgement that they belong to God to an actual transformed existence through which they live out their faith in real and obvious ways. Stewardship is a way of life—it is *the* way of life for individuals and communities who belong to God.”²

Thinking of relationships through stewardship is problematic for people. The consumerist culture we live in socializes certain desires in us, like competition, that are most poignantly observed during adolescence. Therefore, I believe stewardship is the antithesis of consumerism. This contradiction, however, opened a window for me: What could youth ministry look like if stewardship living were its guide?

In order to answer this question I will outline the historical construction of adolescence to illustrate how competition has been a driving force for shaping consumer society. I will then build a framework for how competition has created a value system for the haves and have-nots

¹CL4560, *Money and the Mission of the Church*, class notes by Charles Lane and Erica Kennedy. Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, MN, February 11, 2013.

²Mark Allan Powell, “Stewardship for the Missional Church,” *Word and World Supplement Series 6: Rethinking Stewardship; Our Culture, Our Theology, Our Practices* (2010): 77.

of the perennial youth population, culminating in a false sense of stewardship as an adult. Using Kathryn Tanner as a theological partner, I will then examine how Tanner's *Economy of Grace* supports a case for why stewardship is a necessary lens for living well with one another. Finally I aim to offer praxis for living out and participating in stewardship ministry within the first third of life (ages 0-30), substantiated through vocation, Sabbath, and worship. I maintain that youth ministry is not just another dimension of stewardship, but that stewardship should be the paradigm for youth ministry.

Consumerism is powerful. Even as an adult, its grip convinced me to make a completely unnecessary shoe purchase to fit in with people half my age. It's no surprise then that the greater adolescent population of Western society, a cross section of which I see on a daily basis within the context of ministry I do, unknowingly receives the brunt of society's consumer-driven training into adulthood. Young people learn to buy *this* and not *that* in order to fit in, to participate in *this* program and not *that* one for personal advancement, and to go *here* and not *there* to someday become marketable. A more critically defined characterization of consumerism is the force that compels society to acquire more, "...as manufacturers and advertisers attempt to call group identities into existence where before there had been nothing but inchoate feelings."³ Being a consumer gives a false sense of belonging through the brands with which people associate. Thomas Hine, a writer contributing to the fields of history, culture, and design deconstructs the concept of "teenager" in *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*. After much study, he deduces that for a young person (approximately ages 12-18), "Figuring out where they fit in—to the universe, the world, the economy, their social circle,

³Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool*. (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 24.

their family—is a project on which teenagers spend a lot of their time and energy. Despite the mythology of youth as a revolutionary and utopian time, study after study suggests that teenagers’ principal preoccupation is to adapt, to find a place in life.”⁴ Additionally, Hine says, “Teenagers are losing their license for irresponsibility while, at the same time, they continue to be denied a role in their society, other than that of style setters and consumers.”⁵ Essentially, the message that young people receive is that they exist merely to consume, turning the time of adolescence into one big competition. To understand how it is that society has arrived at such a twisted way of being in relationship with self, God, and community through consumerism, some historical context is required.

It is at this point that a historical construction of adolescence becomes helpful to illustrate how competition has been a driving force for shaping consumer society. For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries up until post-World War II, the United States experienced a shift in the value of education. Prior to this move, education was important, but only to a certain extent. Hine points out that, “American high schools are often criticized, but rarely challenged. We have become so accustomed to the idea that high school should be the universal experience of our youth that we don’t even consider other possibilities.”⁶

Traditionally, as Hine explains throughout *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*, once a person (generally a young man) looked old enough to work, he/she worked, contributing as a productive member of the family. Age was not a prerequisite for earning an income. Women tended to stay in school longer than men, because they were often not needed for manual

⁴Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*. (New York, New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 2.

⁵*Ibid.*, 8.

⁶*Ibid.*, 139.

labor but as teachers, which required additional schooling. The Great Depression of the 1930s into the mid-1940s started to change the tide for adolescents. With the rising need for jobs to be distributed to displaced adults, work that was usually performed by young people became increasingly harder to find. “The austerity of the early 1930s could have killed youth culture, and for a time it appeared that it had. Yet, the enforced separation of young people from the economic mainstream and the emergence of high school as the common experience of young Americans led directly to the emergence of teenagers as we know them today.”⁷ High school thus became a viable way to keep youth productive.

Youth culture, for better or worse, has become contained to a collective educational experience called high school, which serves as a platform for various types of influence, creating a powerful market for competition. Hine quotes Stanford professor, Edward A. Ross, from a 1901 writing that surprisingly still holds truth for today; “[T]hat the school is ‘an economical system of police,’ succeeding religion as ‘the method of indirect social restraint.’”⁸ The ambition of high school today points every individual toward graduation when historically that was not the case. “The quality of a high school is usually judged by its graduates’ admission into and performance in college. Preparing students for life is an admirable goal, but you have to wait a lifetime to see whether you have done a good job. College admission, by contrast, is an immediate indicator of success.”⁹ Former indicators of “success,” like career, marriage, and child bearing have become distant, if not impossible, motivations for the youth of

⁷*Ibid.*, 204.

⁸*Ibid.*, 155.

⁹*Ibid.*, 154.

today as they look forward to their imminent adulthood. What has replaced these classic goals of the young is advancement and perfection of self in preparation for the elusive “future.”

Furthermore, bygone rites of passage celebrating the corridor into adulthood, like the church’s practice of Confirmation (within respective communities of faith) for example, are less than ever about taking ownership of one’s own faith through affirming his/her baptismal promise. What used to be a marker of adulthood in the church, Confirmation has morphed into a program that requires youth to master particular theological information. Instead, events like prom and graduation have succeeded former milestones as significant moments to be remembered into adulthood’s passageway. “Compared with most other societies, ours [in the United States] is short of rituals that meaningfully recognize young people’s arrival at maturity.”¹⁰ The problem is not so much that our preferred rites of passage may be changing, but that the vitality of the ones we have chosen to celebrate are not encouraging a robust sense of self within adolescents and oftentimes expect mastery rather than exploration and continuing growth. The evolution of high school has sold us on the notion that perfecting the individual at whatever cost achieves success in adulthood. An ethos of competition has made us into, “...a culture that is perpetually adolescent: always becoming but never mature, incessantly losing its none-too-evident innocence.”¹¹ This tension has given way to a difficult paradox to which the church, as well as the rest of Western society, must reconcile: “The very qualities that adults find exciting and attractive about teenagers are entangled with those we find terrifying. Their energy threatens anarchy. Their physical beauty and budding sexuality menaces moral standards. Their assertion of physical and intellectual power makes their

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 13.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 10.

parents at once proud and painfully aware of their own mortality.”¹² Society has inadvertently taken the humanity out of growing up, capitulating in our makings of a market of competitive consumerism.

The church even falls prey to sending a similar message of consumerism to its young people by using youth ministry as a way to entice participants. This is done through the guise of “join our youth group to be a good Christian kid” to lure in or fix fringe youth. Andrew Root, Associate Professor of Children, Youth and Family Ministries at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota, writes about relational ministry as an invitation to participate in the otherness of a young person (Christ’s presence as medium between “I” and “the other”), while pointing out the unsavory side of the same coin: “Using relationships as an end is a mistake because it assumes that there is a third thing (a relationship with Jesus) that can be attained outside of the relationship between I and you.”¹³ The church can turn well-meaning attempts of drawing young people into relationship into a numbers game – vying for the amount saved for Jesus as a marketing tool, instead of honoring the “concrete humanity of the other.”¹⁴ Rather than teaching practices for grateful living, the church invites young people to be consumers of programs with the flashiest gimmicks or that require fundraising in order to personally participate. In other words, this is the church practicing youth ministry of competitive consumerism and not stewardship.

Competition by and large is not inherently bad. In fact, I think to a certain degree, we are wired to compete. Take, for instance, Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution and survival of

¹²*Ibid.*, 11.

¹³Andrew Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 116.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 117.

the fittest. Throughout the history of time, creation has figured out how to adapt and change to accommodate different environmental changes in order to sustain life. But, when competition starts from a place of scarcity instead of abundance, our way of thinking and being becomes twisted. Scarcity thinking unconsciously builds a framework for competition as a value system. By thinking in terms of scarcity, we place value on competition, categorizing people as haves and have-nots. Scarcity then begs a system for discerning claim and worth. Mark Allan Powell writes, “Entitlement is a particularly prevalent attitude in our current culture, and it provides a sure prescription for joyless living.”¹⁵ I would further argue that not only does an attitude of entitlement dictate joyless living, but it also does nothing to support how we can live well with one another.

To expand on the idea of scarcity thinking: “To have” is to be in a position to consume, so it follows that those who “do not have” are in a position to go without. Scarcity thinking then sucks us into a cycle of competing for more, so that we are not one of the unfortunate ones without. Competition then perpetuates an individualistic modus operandi, turning us in on ourselves. In the book of Job, readers see the suffering of an innocent man and God’s ability to take Job out of himself, by putting him in the wider context of creation. “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?” (Job 38:4-7). Succumbing to consumerism as king does not help young people (or any aged person) see that there is a greater context outside of their

¹⁵Mark Allan Powell, “Stewardship for the Missional Church,” *Word and World Supplement Series 6: Rethinking Stewardship; Our Culture, Our Theology, Our Practices* (2010): 79.

existence, but reinforces a caste-like way of existence that feeds off of distinguishing labels of who we are or who we are not. The truth of the matter is that none of us are “too” anything to be held back from God’s generosity and abundance¹⁶ as Malachi 8:8-10 would suggest: “Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, ‘How are we robbing you?’ In your tithes and offerings! You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me—the whole nation of you! Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.”

What reads as a precursor of sorts to American Movie Classic’s (AMC) drama, *Mad Men*, Thomas Frank, in *The Conquest of Cool*, offers a sobering parallel of hip consumerism from the 1960s, maintaining that what we believe today to be individuality was really cunningly crafted by the advertising industry. Frank writes:

“The central theme that gives coherence to American advertising of both the early and late sixties is this: Consumer culture is a gigantic fraud. It demands that you act like everyone else, that you restrain yourself, that you fit in with the crowd, when you are in fact an individual. Consumer culture lies and seeks to sell you shoddy products that will fall apart or be out of style in a few years; but you crave authenticity and are too smart to fall for that Madison Avenue stuff (your neighbors may not be). Above all, consumer culture fosters conventions that are repressive and unfulfilling; but with the help of hip trends you can smash through those, create a new world in which people can be themselves, pretense has vanished, and healthy appetites are liberated from the stultifying mores of the past. Conformity may have been a bulwark of the mass society, but in the 1960s it was usurped by difference, by an endless succession of appeals to defy conformity, to rebel, to stand out, to be one’s self.”

Conformity, whether to an idea of what the nonconformist should embody or to the ideology of the individual who has it all, is still conformity to an empty promise. Whispers of Isaiah are brought to mind: “The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon

¹⁶CL4560, *Money and the Mission of the Church*, class notes by Charles Lane and Erica Kennedy. Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, MN, February 11, 2013.

it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever” (Is. 40:7-8). Might there be a more substantial promise to cling to?

In a consumer-driven culture, we socialize our young people to look at life through a lens of competition. From how society values a certain kind of education to how specific behaviors are engrained and rewarded in young people, having the edge gets you somewhere and keeps you from being the outsider. With an inward-facing focus, we learn to worry about the self first before all else, giving the leftovers away. Mark writes in the 12th chapter of his Gospel account:

“[Jesus] sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.’”

What this pericope helps us understand about living well together in Christian community is that we are called not to give out of abundance, but to give abundantly of ourselves; free of a transactionally competitive mindset with an outward-facing agenda.

An education in consumerism throughout adolescence then culminates into a false sense of stewardship as an adult. How the church has traditionally responded to abundance, is to gear stewardship messages toward the adult-only. This, of course, makes sense when stewardship is looked at as only tithing. Plus, it’s the adults who hypothetically have the money to give, so why not gear the stewardship message toward them? Rolf Jacobson, associate professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota, writes, *“The church needs to do a better job talking about money.* And in order to do this, the church might want to consider talking a lot less about giving ... Here is what we say through our stewardship

practices: 10% belongs to God; the rest belongs to you. Give that 10% to the church, which will use it for God's purposes. The other 90%? Do whatever you want with it."¹⁷ As we know from passages like Psalm 24, though, everything we are and everything we have belongs to God: "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers" (Psalm 24:1-2). A mindset of stewardship as just giving money consequently creates a dualism that, *some* of what I have is God's, but *most* of what I have is mine.¹⁸

Money is spoken of frequently in the Bible, especially throughout the Gospels. Jesus does not talk about money because he is concerned with the welfare of paying the church's bills; rather, he is concerned with the welfare of his brothers and sisters, and their relationship with money by addressing the critical reality of his context. Take, for instance, Mark 10:17-22:

"As [Jesus] was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing: go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions."

Both Jesus and the man seem to grieve the realization that the man cannot turn his back on his wealth, so his only other option is to turn his back on Jesus.¹⁹ Is it not still true of people today to have to make the same choice? The stewardship message today's parishioners are hearing generally leaves three lasting impressions: 1) Guilt for having too much, 2) Shame for having

¹⁷Rolf Jacobson, "Rethinking Stewardship: An Introduction," *Word and World Supplement Series 6: Rethinking Stewardship; Our Culture, Our Theology, Our Practices* (2010): 2-4.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁹CL4560, *Money and the Mission of the Church*, class notes by Charles Lane and Erica Kennedy. Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, MN, February 11, 2013.

too little, or 3) Apathy because church is simply a place to visit once a week to go through the motions. I move that stewardship is more radical than giving money to the church, and as Fred Gaiser, professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota, writes:

“...stewards are made by God ... thus, the beginning of stewardship will always be the radical announcement that God is not for sale and does not exist to be served. God simply gives.”²⁰

In her book, *Economy of Grace*, theologian Kathryn Tanner deconstructs capitalism as present day society knows it, offering a reformed alternative that looks unstructured and global through a theological principle she deems as: “an economy of grace.” Her work, along with that of Douglas John Hall’s *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship*, is useful for supporting the case for why stewardship is a necessary lens for living well with one another in community. At the heart of her argument for an economy of grace, Tanner says that, “God creates the whole world, in all its aspects—material and spiritual—according to such a noncompetitive economy, so that it should be such a noncompetitive economy to every degree possible; it holds us as creatures of body and soul up to its measures.”²¹ For Tanner, money and grace are not mutually exclusive entities, “Everything of significance in the one—the sign—is reduced to the other—its meaning. What is really at issue in worldly success is grace, or what is really at issue in one’s religious standing is money. One is the appearance; the other is the reality.”²² Thus, the filters we use to determine our response to realities of the material aspects of life are universal, unconditional giving and noncompetitive relations. One could criticize Tanner’s work

²⁰Fred Gaiser, “‘Spend your money for whatever you wish’ (Deuteronomy 14:26): The Bible on Stewardship,” *Word and World Supplement Series 6: Rethinking Stewardship; Our Culture, Our Theology, Our Practices* (2010): 55.

²¹Kathryn Tanner, *Economy of Grace*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 29.

²²*Ibid.*, 9.

in this area of study as being too Marxist or too Utopian, but her point is that Scripture points toward how humanity can live well together by examining the economy of capitalism. Her claim is that the change starts with how each individual opts to exercise their personal freedom. Tanner concludes, "...[with a] theological vision of a universally inclusive community of mutual benefit as our moral compass ... the goal we see is of that sort—a global economy re-organized to avoid crisis by advantaging everyone."²³

Grace then becomes our new currency and, by virtue of the fact that it is has been freely given for all, cannot be held up for competition. The apostle Paul writes in Romans 6:7-11, "For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." Christ's death was not exclusive to some and not others; he died for the sake of the world (cf. John 3:16), meaning how we treat our material and personal relationships directly relate to how we treat Christ. Douglas John Hall names this understanding as "imaging God," turning the *imago Dei* into a verb instead of a noun: "...understanding of the relationship between humanity and extrahuman nature, to assess the character and extent of empirical Christianity's culpability in this wrong relationship, and to point to an alternative Christian conceptualization of this relationship."²⁴

²³*Ibid.*, 142.

²⁴Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1986), 19.

“Self-sharing for the good of the other”²⁵ is one way that Tanner makes universal, unconditional giving and noncompetitive relations a tangible practice. Tanner writes:

“Rather than being in competition with our benefiting others, having becomes in this way the very condition of our giving to others. Having does not stand in the way of and is not incompatible with giving to others; having need not, therefore, come at the expense of others. As elsewhere in a theological economy, we are to give to others not out of our poverty but out of our own fullness. Jesus entered into our poverty for the sake of the poor, but he did so as someone rich with the Father’s own love ... The whole point of God’s dealings with us as creator, covenant partner, and redeemer in Christ is to bring the good of God’s very life into our own. Our lives participate in that divine mission and thereby realize the shape of God’s own economy by giving that follows the same principle: self-sharing for the good of others.”²⁶

In other words, humanity must universally acknowledge the problems to which we contribute.

Through confession of our shortcomings, we make a concerted effort to stop contributing to those problems for the benefit of the other, proffering the power to change the world through God’s divine agency. Stewardship in this sense takes new shape. Tanner explains, “The unconditionality of God’s giving implies the absolute inclusiveness of God’s giving: God gives without restrictions to everyone and everything, for the benefit of all.”²⁷

It does not make sense, then, for stewardship to be introduced during adulthood, but when new life is brought into a community to be fostered under the umbrella of stewardship through vocation, Sabbath, and worship. For Christian communities, Hall’s words offer an accountability to this way of living when he writes, “The onus is on us to drop our masquerade of bland and unthreatening servitude, of supplying without question what we think people want, and become really faithful servants of a gospel that may indeed refuse to cater to people’s wants but nevertheless address their real needs.”²⁸ Stewardship living is not

²⁵Kathryn Tanner, *Economy of Grace*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 85.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 84-85.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 72.

²⁸Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1986), 18.

submission to a doctrine of forced service, but is a self-awareness of how I treat the other in the face of Christ, freeing me to live a life of gratitude and abundance. Nowhere is this more powerfully evidenced than in the accounts of creation found in Genesis chapters one and two, which make space for any type of person to share in the invitation extended through creation. The Christian narrative begins with God entering into relationship with humanity, unveiling characteristics of who God is, and how God chooses to respond and deal with God's creation.

Genesis 1:27-2:3 reads:

“So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’ God said, ‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.’ And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.”

God knit the world together in relationship, with humanity to be embraced by God's image, calling it good. There was no compulsion for God to create, but creation exists, so there is indication that a God exists who fulfills creation through relationship. It is in those relationships we manage that God's fullness is understood. Further, “God works among the least in the quietest of ways, in the failures of the world; that God was doing great things for us in Christ becomes at all obvious only after the fact, in forms of benefit—changed ways of living, the gift of immortality—that were hitherto beyond our reach. God wants a return from us of a particular sort—our love and gratitude and devotion to God's mission of giving to others.”²⁹ It

²⁹Kathryn Tanner, *Economy of Grace*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 71.

is through this love and gratitude that stewardship living shapes youth ministry through practicing vocation, Sabbath, and worship; i.e., practicing the relationship we tend to self, God, and community.

Instead of finding identity of self in the material possessions we have, stewardship living encourages that work to be done through vocation. Because humans are God's representatives to exercise care for its fellow creatures (cf. Genesis 2:15),³⁰ an understanding of our unique design for service of the neighbor becomes paramount to youth ministry. The fulfillment of God's abundant life for each person comes to fruition through vocation. When the gifts and strengths that give people the greatest joy intersect with a need in the world, vocation is being lived out (Frederick Buechner). Elizabeth Cady Stanton once said, "Nature never repeats herself, and the possibilities of one human soul will never be found in another." What each person has to offer the body of Christ is truly unique, and each person is the only one capable of bringing his or her own gifts and strengths to the table in service for the neighbor. God, who created each person to be a distinctive individual, intentionally placed special traits in each person for the benefit of the whole body. Examples of vocational practices are strength-finding activities, caring adults consistently naming where God has been at work in the life of a young person, and even baptism.

Baptism is especially important at the start of our vocation, because it is each baptized person's commission and invitation to be a part of what God is up to in the world. Mark 16:15-16 reads, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be

³⁰CL4560, *Money and the Mission of the Church*, class notes by Charles Lane and Erica Kennedy. Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, MN, February 11, 2013.

condemned.” It is important to note that this passage does not say, “...the one who does not believe and is not baptized will be condemned.” Baptism is a time for faith communities to gather in and celebrate the work God will do in and through the one being baptized, and to claim the baptized person as a new creation in the body of Christ. In the Lutheran tradition, it is meaningful to acknowledge from the very start of a baby’s life that they are in relationship with God. God works without baptism, but with it, there is assurance of God’s promise to always be faithful to us as we grow in our understanding of imaging God. “[The *imago Dei*] points toward a mystery of human identity that must be rediscovered by each generation of the believing community and worked out with regard to the specific problems and possibilities confronting that generation.”³¹ Discovering who we have been made to be in light of imaging God is an urgent need of today’s church, considering our highly technological and globalized world that gives young men and women a different way of understanding the self and how that self relates to their greater environment.

In the same way that vocation encourages a young person to find their identity of self in their unique design for practicing the love and gratitude of stewardship living, so does the practice of Sabbath give a young person a way to tend to one’s relationship to God through the stewardship of time. Scripture calls us into an intimate relationship with God. In our constant intake of the world around us, it is easy to forget how to stop and exhale – how to let God refresh and renew our relationship with God. Without Sabbath, we are not truly our whole self. “The practice [of Sabbath] is to find that balance point at which, having rested, we do our work

³¹Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1986), 20.

with greater ease and joy, and bring healing and delight to our endeavors.”³² When we are our whole selves, we are better able to live into the vibrancy that is offered by being in relationship with God and community.

The reality for the families I work with is that they are stretched to the max. Sacred days and events for church activities are becoming relics of the past because other activities are competing for precious time. My concern is not so much for the fact that the young people I work with are interested in participating in other activities outside of church, like sports, music and clubs, but that when I approach a parent about having their son/daughter participate in a church event, that I have to make a concerted effort to make a stronger case for participating in the church event over the “other” activity. Rolf Jacobson, associate professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, MN writes: “We are mistakenly telling people that what they give to church—both in terms of time and in terms of treasure—matters to God; but what they give at home—in terms of time and in terms of treasure—does not matter to God.”³³ This dualism poses an interesting conundrum, requiring youth ministers to help families reconsider their stewardship of time, “Because [when] we belong to God, everything about us belongs to God: our selves, our bodies, our families, our time, our relationships—even our possessions.”³⁴ Discussing Sabbath is a helpful way to start the conversation of stewarding time. This discussion would prioritize the value of holy rest and renewal, and then require the church to support families in however they feel called as a family to steward their time, keeping them accountable to their respective Sabbath practices.

³²*Ibid.*, 8.

³³Rolf Jacobson, “Rethinking Stewardship: An Introduction,” *Word and World Supplement Series 6: Rethinking Stewardship; Our Culture, Our Theology, Our Practices* (2010): 4.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 4.

Further, our relational God continually reveals Godself in a trustworthy way, calling Creation to participate. The beauty of God is that God is God and cannot be put into a box, but can only be experienced through each individual's personal faith experience. In considering the 10 Commandments, there are only 10 things that God has asked us to abide by. Meaning, there are infinite things we *can* do, making the abundance of our life-giving God unfathomable. The law allows us to live in a way that encourages us to understand the boundaries of what being human means. In the words of Richard Rohr, "Without law in some form, and also without butting up against that law, we cannot move forward easily and naturally."³⁵ Therefore, gathering as a community to confess the transgressions of our shortcomings, sharing in one another's brokenness, and telling the story of our personal faith experience through worship is the final way to practice stewardship living.

In the Lutheran tradition, worship is a communal time for reflection and praise, joining in remembrance through Word and sacrament to be sent out into the world as disciples proclaiming the Good News. Worship reflects stewardship in the sense that it is our response to God's abundance by how we steward our relationship to the greater community. Root writes, "Word and sacrament give the church its distinction within the world, but relationship, person meeting persons, reveals its solidarity to the world."³⁶ In worship, faith in a trustworthy God becomes the great leveler amidst the brokenness that God saved us from. Worship marks the One who we go out into the world to serve: "It is the power of one who will not assert the will to be apart from the will to be-with the beloved. From the perspective of the power ideals of peoples and kingdoms seeking dominion wherever and however they can, it is a pathetic

³⁵Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward*. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 25.

³⁶Andrew Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 109.

power, this omnipotence of the Crucified!”³⁷ In other words, the foolishness of the cross is where we gather, letting go of the gods that consume us, to be invited to participate in the lovingly abundant, redemptive, and creative work of God in the world.

I conclude that it is not electric blueberry cross-trainers that are the problem, but my framework for answering the question: What would God have me to do with these? This paper has made a move to not add another dimension to youth ministry, but to use stewardship as the lens for creating a community that lives well together by tending to our relationship with self, God, and community via vocation, Sabbath, and worship. Stewardship is more than what I am willing to give away; rather it is means of self-awareness that shapes how I see the world. To reach this conclusion, it was necessary to outline the historical construction of adolescence to illustrate how competition has been a driving force for shaping consumer society. This history informed the framework for how competition has created a value system for the haves and have-nots of the perennial youth population, culminating in a false sense of stewardship as an adult. Kathryn Tanner then helped to support why stewardship is a necessary lens for living well with one another. Finally, I offered a way to live out and participate in stewardship ministry within the first third of life (ages 0-30) as validated through the stewardship practices of vocation, Sabbath, and worship. My belief is that when the church recognizes how influential consumerism is for its young people and starts authentically examining how to live out our Christian identity, stewardship living as the paradigm for youth ministry offers a meaningful structure for forming robust and hopeful young adults.

³⁷Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1986), 194.

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