

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Loyalty Programmes"
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Have you noticed that every major company is coming out with some sort of loyalty programme? Just the other day, it hit me. I go to get gas at a certain station or company because of the points. I go on a certain airline because of the points. I go to a certain department store because of the points. I go to a certain grocery store where I could be earning the points if I had such and such a card and if I did such and such...then I could get some free groceries. And why not get free groceries? I've got a credit card that offers me a rebate at the end of the year based on my spending...and the list goes on.

Companies have learned to try to get us to be loyal to them by adding a little "perk." If you're going to be buying stuff, why not get something extra at the same time, they reason. And for me, it has worked without me really thinking a great deal about it until this last week. And of course, they are doing the same with everyone who goes out to buy groceries and gas and travel, etc.

What I realized through these reflections is that loyalty programmes are in place because consumers don't have much loyalty to any brand any more. More and more rarely do you see someone committed to just one brand, just one item because they know the name. It's not enough that it is a good, quality item or that it is ethically produced or that there is good service at the place you purchase. You expect a "perk" now as well.

So in this well branded society of ours, where does the church fit in? No longer can we expect that people will come to church just because we happen to be the brand they grew up with. No longer can we expect people to choose church activities over all the other activities in their lives, because we are just another organization looking for loyalty in the busy lives of our members and adherents.

I've been thinking about this, because I've talked with a number of you now who have expressed that they or someone close to them are in a mixed spiritual relationship. Catholic and Presbyterian, Salvation Army and

Presbyterian, United and Presbyterian, Anglican and Presbyterian...you name it. Sometimes it is hard to make decisions and to give time to what you know is very important part of your life: your spiritual life. And then the kids have to face competition with sports, with school events, with all kinds of other activities. And I'm about to offer a membership class to tell you first of all what I believe being a Christian is all about, then what the Church is all about, and then the Presbyterian Church and the similarities and differences between all the denominations and even the non-denominations. Because each of us needs to know what we are committing ourselves to here in this place, whether young or old, new or having been here all our lives.

And you can take this course for interest and exploration, or as a preparation to become a member, and we will add courses depending on how many show interest.

Part of what I might tell you in that course is how we do share with one another in the finances of the national church with which we affiliate called the Presbyterian Church in Canada. It is a thing called Presbyterians Sharing. This 9 or 10 million dollar budget funds mission work from sea to sea in Canada, international missions, theological education and administration of national programmes in the national offices. We pledge a portion of our budget every year to Presbyterians Sharing, and you can learn more about it from www.presbyterian.ca where a brand new web cite has been created recently. You can even donate online if you feel so moved, or see other gift potentials there. It's not our loyalty programme, because you won't get any perks by donating there. But at least you can see some of what we do nationally in 950 or so churches and many missions here and around the world. And if you are interested in St. David's congregation, we too have a web cite (www.stdavids.nf.ca) and you can read these sermons there and get more of a sense of what we are doing.

Jesus was not as interested in get some loyalty, or just a piece of his followers. He was interested in getting us, heart and soul, completely and thoroughly involved in his movement by knowing him first of all and then living in our lives in that knowledge and mission. I chose mission hymns today because each of us who claim Christ as our Saviour and Lord is an agent of that mission.

Jesus told stories to get his points across. Those stories are called parables. In the parable of the "shrewd manager," Jesus' point is often misunderstood because people hear him saying that God praised the accounts manager who stole from him. It seems as if stealing, or even if we moderated it to be unethical expenditures, as we have lately heard on the news, it seems like stealing is exonerated, which cannot be.

So let me try to see what Jesus is saying to us. First of all, let us note that this is a wealthy owner and an accounts manager. This is not an elected official taking moneys from a public purse. In the Middle East, two thousand years ago, the owner could do what he wanted to do. It was his money, no one else's. He was not accountable to anyone (except God) and just like the vineyard owner who paid all the workers an acceptable full day's wage, even if they had only worked an hour, he could do what he wanted with his money.

Jesus clearly had this rich man say that the losses he had experienced were not the most important part of the lesson. Rather, the owner was impressed with this otherwise unimpressive and lackluster manager. Remember, the story does not say that the manager had stolen from the rich man before. It was clear that he was doing so now. So what impressed the rich man? It was the manager's ability to use the money to make friends and to influence others in his direction.

It was this relational ethic that the manager used, that the rich man commended. Jesus was trying to teach us to remember that money only goes so far. And while we are called to be good stewards with our money, we must also remember that the money can be used to help others find spiritual life and other eternal benefits. Don't forget the mission of the church in the midst of the money questions.

This does not mean that you can go to work and find ways to rip off the employer or the company to help someone become more interested in the faith. It also doesn't mean that I can or anyone here can somehow steal from the church and give to the poor. We give voluntarily to the poor. And by the way, if you are interested in how we might help the poor, as God seems to be interested in this, you can become more well informed by some facts we've posted on the St. David's web cite.

What it does mean is that at the end of the road, in the church and in our personal finances, we have to ask ourselves whether this money has been used wisely to bring others to the knowledge and experience of God.

Jesus closes the parable with several teachings on stewardship. First, if you can be trusted with some little thing, you can be trusted in a larger endeavor. But if you can't be trusted in even some little thing, then larger campaigns are not on the horizon for you. Take tithing. If you are not interested in even looking at giving a fixed percentage of your total income, fixed or not, large or small, then you probably won't see the blessing of God in that area of your life. But if you give proportionally to what you receive, you will see the blessing of God.

Jesus was also addressing the religious leaders of his time as well as us. He seized the moment to say that you have to determine what is more important to you: the money or the God who gives you life. He could've used any particular item that people devote themselves to...he could have used alcohol or drugs or food or sex or TV or any number of items that people completely and totally devote themselves to. But he used money, because time and money tell us a lot about ourselves, often more than we want to hear.

How can we know we are being loyal to God? He has no loyalty programme, no points, no financial perks, just a group of people called the Church. First of all, be sure that you are in relationship to Him, that you have given your life to Him, changed your attitude of rebellion to one of agreement with Jesus and his ways. Second, begin more and more to ask what he wants you to do with your time and money and the rest of your life. Third, make time to worship, to learn and to give to others from what you have received.

These steps are not new. But they are a part of the way you can know you are being loyal to the One who is faithful and caring to the end. That loyalty is one with which we should all be concerned.

Let us pray.