

Milwaukee, WI

December 18, 1990

Dear Jim, Mary, Liz, Christy, Loren, Brad, and Alan,

I'm not too swift. The attached had it's beginning as a "letter sermon" on the subject of stewardship in the fall of 1985. Soon after I preached it my good wife got it on to a disk in a readable fashion. This December I have worked at editing it with the intention of getting it to you as a Christmas gift. While I am slow it will get to you before Christmas, I believe. Merry Christmas.

Dear Grandchildren of Wallace and Mary Olsen:

I'm writing this for several reasons. First of all, with our family reunion coming up in the summer of '86 I have been thinking "family" and on a kind of nostalgia kick. Second, I have been seeing some old reruns of The Untouchables on late television which were set in the time when your grandparents, Mary and Wallace Olsen, were the parents of three children -- Marjorie, Marion, and Walter. The setting for The Untouchables was not far from where the Olsens lived in the 1920's and the years that followed. Third, my mind has been on the subject of Christian stewardship. Your grandparents are an example of Christian stewardship. The way they practiced it was commendable. They should not be considered as a model to be copied today, however, for they lived in a different time under different circumstances. Their style of life -- which was practicing stewardship -- will provide some insights and give you a glimpse into your roots.

There is value in looking to one's own story from the past. For a moment I am going to wax "theological" and talk about "history" in two ways as has the German theologian, Rudolf Bultmann. In the German language there are two words for history: Historie and Geschichte. Historie designates what actually happened pointing to events which took place in a cause and event chain. Geschichte designates an event or events of history which continue to have influence or meaning on later persons and events. An oversimplification would be that my or our personal history is Geschichte.

The Bible does a whole lot of story telling in both the Old and New Testaments. For Jews and then Christians the Biblical stories are Geschichte -- my and our story. When the Letter To The Hebrews was written it was personal history for the readers describing acts of living by faith that was done by people in the past. In chapter 12 of the Letter To The Hebrews says:

Therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

In a nutshell he was saying, "Remembering the people of 'our' story should make us strong for our living." Knowing and remembering our personal history can do for us as a favorite hymn puts it:

And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long,
Steals on the ear the triumph song,
And hearts are brave again, and arms are strong.

I will preface my remarks with several things that need to be said.

As you read this remember that your grandparents were far from perfect. They shared the fate of humans. In terms of our faith they were like each of us and the people Paul was speaking of when he said, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

What I write is out of a sense of gratitude to them. I am very thankful for some good influences they had upon my life and I believe my two sisters share that gratitude. Therefore, each of you can be grateful that Wallace and Mary Olsen were your grandparents.

A third thing to keep in mind is that some of the things I consider virtuous now, a person who's age equals the national speed limit, were embarrassing to me and not appreciated by me when I was a child and a young person. My mind has changed.

It should also be noted that I probably suffer from two weaknesses in my reflecting on their lives. On the one hand I cannot always trust my memory back over the past four or five decades, and I am sure that my memory is colored by my prejudices.

Keep in mind that their style of life is not in vogue today. I don't pretend to practice it as they did, but for the results they achieved you'll agree that they did something in the right way. Many elements of their life style are still valid today.

I.

The first thing I would say is that Wallace and Mary Olsen understood life -- both humans and the world -- as a gift of God and that persons are given freedom to determine to a great extent what they will do with their life. They endeavored to live as they understood God wanted people to live.

I don't remember them ever complaining about fate dealing them a bad blow. Nor can I recall them blaming other people for the circumstances of their lives. When it comes down to it, I think they graciously and gratefully received life. Neither do I remember them comparing their lives to the lives of others nor were they envious of others. The gift of life was not just for them, but for all people. This gave them a respect and sensitivity to other persons.

Your grandparents understood life was a gift from God and one was to live it in keeping with His will.

II.

A second aspect of their lives was that they had goals and objectives that caused them to be discriminating in terms of the way they lived their lives and used their time, talents, and money.

Their church was important to them. Your parents will remember that the church was probably about first in their lives. They gave a fantastic number of hours to their church. Both of them did a stint at Sunday School teaching. Your Grandmother did service as a Treasurer. Your Grandfather was the Clerk and cut mimeograph stencils and ran off the church bulletins. Both of them did their share and more than their share in terms of looking after the building and grounds of the church doing such things as lawn mowing, snow shoveling, and cleaning. They also believed in the church's wider mission -- even to the ends of the earth. Whenever missionaries or guest speakers came to our church they would also appear at our dinner table.

They were regular financial to the church. I don't remember ever going to Sunday School and Church when they did not have an offering envelope to put into the offering. And when they were responsible for me I don't remember ever going to church without an envelope. And we went to church. One didn't make a choice about whether or not to go. It was like going to sleep at night -- that's what you do.

Very important to them was their family and their home. They built their home in 1929 which turned out to be one of the worst years to enter into a home commitment.

They held in very high regard the growth and of their children in a variety of ways -- educationally, physically, socially, and religiously. More will be said about this later.

They believed in schools and the for learning in them. I never remember them being angry when I didn't get good grades. (I don't recall Marion and Marge having those problems.) When a grade was down they were more disappointed and hurt than angry. The kind of thing they would say was, "Bring home your lessons. We'll help you." And they did. They were both pretty smart. I never did know as much Algebra as did your grandmother. They would also provide help if we were making a diorama, a Latin derivative note book, and they would help us with special projects or reports.

They believed in books. Books and reading abounded in the house of your grandparents. Encyclopedias were available to us in their house.

They believed in music. Marge learned the violin and piano. Marion played the cornet and I blew on a baritone horn. Grandma Olsen kept track of our practice time. Your grandparents saw me play in more concerts than football games. That tells you something about their priorities.

Your grandparents had goals and objectives that made them discriminating in terms of how they used their time, talent, and treasure.

III.

At the beginning of this letter I said that your grandparents practiced stewardship. Sometimes it's said that faithful stewardship means to give 10% of our money to the church. But that leads to a distorted understanding of stewardship. Scott Libbey says:

Stewardship ought to spring from a faith conviction that ALL of our resources (including our very selves) come from and belong to God."

I think that was their faith conviction.

Thus far I have said that your grandparents practiced stewardship that was rooted in their understanding of life. They understood life -- both persons and all of the world -- as a gift of God, and that persons are given freedom to determine to a great extent what they will do with their life. They endeavored to live as they understood God wanted people to live, and that is especially made known in the life and teachings of Jesus. The second thing I mentioned was that they had goals and objectives that caused them to be discriminating in terms of the way they used their time, money, and talents.

You will recall that I said that their style of life is not in vogue today. The way they lived life was determined by a third belief that is not at all popular today. **Your grandparents believed that through hard work, discipline, and frugality they could achieve desired goals.**

In the tenth chapter of Mark's Gospel Jesus talks about the hazards of wealth. Those words of Jesus we need to hear and reflect upon in our day. Your grandparents and many others who lived through the great depression of the 1930's, however, were not confronted with the hazards of wealth. The hazard that confronted them was having enough food on their tables, providing shoes and clothing for their children, and working to keep the mortgage holder from foreclosing on their house.

Your grandparents were people of the Great Depression and the impact of those years would stay with them and with many who lived through that time for the rest of their days.

Your grandparents lived by the Protestant work ethic -- that means that hard and honest work will be productive. It did not mean "Get right with God and he will bless you with wealth." They had the Protestant view of "vocation" that says that one's work is a calling from God should be a service to others.

Possibly these came from the influence of your great grandfather Muirhead who had come from Scotland and while he wasn't tight with his money he knew where his money went and it went only to what he thought were the right places. It may have also come from the Scandinavian Lutheran background of your Olsen great grandparents.

I learned later that in the early thirties which were depression years your grandfather who was a railroad clerk was sometimes out of work and often only worked a few days a week and then at 40 cents an hour. To supplement his income when he wasn't working he sold out of a suit case Health-O household products door to door. He did that walking and using public transportation. When he did get to working regularly again his job was working 3 p.m. to 11 p.m. and seven days a week -- all of it at straight time.

As a small child I can remember a car in our garage and a telephone on a table in the dining room. The telephone was taken out. And I also remember that there was never again a car of theirs in the garage. They rented the garage out to others for a little money. They got a telephone back in their home only when I was in my middle twenties.

As I said, "Your grandparents built their home in 1929. While it was a bad time they had some economic insight. Their house was two stories with a flat upstairs and one downstairs. The upper was rented out for income. There were just two bedrooms in each flat. In 1930 a son was born. (They might have been somewhat undisciplined in some matters.) I was born in my parent's bedroom not a hospital room. I would share with them that bedroom until the Marge and Marion had grown and left home when I was a teenager. I don't believe that damaged my life. There were some times in the 30's when Marion and Marge were moved out of their bedroom to sleep on a fold out bed in the dining room so that when the Lincoln Fields races were on a roomer could be kept in their room. Lincoln Fields Racetrack was a few miles south of our home. It is one of the tracks mentioned in the movie, "The Sting."

Your grandparents lived a kind of puritan life. They were not given to excesses. Conservation was done not so much for ecological purposes but for economic reasons. Lights were turned off, using too much water was a "no no." We had no refrigerator or ice box. Things were kept cold in the basement hopefully in the summer or on the back porch in the winter. Gardening provided a great deal of the food that went on to the table. A whole lot of canning was done. Many were the times that I pulled a hundred pound bag of sugar or 49 pound bag of flour home from the A & P Store. It seemed to me that we were awfully slow in getting a radio -- just a plain radio. Marge and Marion went to Berkley's

or Northerners to listen to the radio after school. I went to listen with my friend, Wib Johnson.

I also recall that they did garden work for our family doctor, Doctor Blim. I wonder now if they were not working to pay off bills that they owed him. Marge and Marion, may know. I'll have to ask them. Having meals at restaurants was a thing we did not know much about. When we traveled by train on "passes" we took lunches or bought food from grocery stores for our meals while on the way. There were many "hand me down" clothes that we wore. Your grandfather was an amateur shoe repair man to lengthen the life of our shoes putting on heels and soles. One could write a rather lengthy, and now it would be a humorous treatise, about those rubber half soles that were bought at a dime store and cemented on to shoes. They kept you from the fun of sliding on polished floors, they made black marks, they didn't last long, they came off in the rain, they would flap when they came loose and had a way of tripping you up. Your grandmother darned socks -- unheard of in today's affluent society. Shoes must have been expensive, because they were worn with patches and with cardboard in them by many. Not long ago I heard a woman say something like, "The reason why I have so many shoes may be because I never had nice shoes as a child." People of my generation are influenced by the depression even today! I like automobiles and love to drive, possibly that's because as a growing child we had no car. My first car came when I was twenty-two.

Yet, through childhood of my two sisters and me, your grandparents provided very much for us that was important. Many people had it worse than we did. We never lacked for school supplies. They always had enough food on the table. There was enough money for a few movies that they thought we should see. There was enough money for me to attend church camp and participate in youth fellowship activities in the Chicago area. As I mentioned earlier music lessons were available to us. Because Marge and Marion were older during the difficult years of the depression I'm sure it was tougher for them.

I believe your grandparents were hooked on a conviction that makes their three children very grateful. They strongly believed that their three children should have college educations. Marge, Marion, and Walter grew up with the idea that we would go to college. When we made a little money it went into our college Savings Account. I never made a decision about whether or not I would go to college. The decision was "where"? That was an assumption that I lived with and they planned to help their children get through college. One of the ways they helped was to encourage us to have jobs and to save our money for college. All three of the Olsen children worked for the Chicago and Eastern Illinois Railroad. Marge and Marion had the more

appropriate jobs for women in the Freight Office. I worked on the track as a gandy dancer on Saturdays and summers in high school, trucked freight, and then worked as a yard clerk during summers in college. When I was home from college for spring break after my 20th birthday in March an insurance man came to our house and presented me with a check for the huge sum of money for 1950 -- \$700.00! I remember your grandfather showing me the matured 20 Year Endowment policy which said on the front "Age at next birthday One Year." Twenty year endowment policies may not be exceptional but they kept up those 50 cent a week payments on those policies so that their children might helped through college. They had given up their car, the telephone, and lived frugally so as to continue those payments.

IV.

But their stewardship was more than hard work, discipline, and frugality. **Stewardship meant being generous and helpful.** I'll mention that briefly. It was not uncommon for your grandmother to help people where there was illness. Visiting people and taking a little food was a part of her style. She remembered the sick and the shut-ins with visits and cards. She carried on a correspondence that was source of help and encouragement to many people. I remember on a number of occasions pulling the wagon full of clothes to large and "looked down on family" in town. She remembered those that Jesus spoke of in the parable when he said, "As you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me." Many a hobo was fed on our back step.

Now just one incident regarding your grandfather. He was a railroad yard clerk in the 1930's. As a small boy I sometimes went to work with him which was great fun. I got to ride engines and cabooses doing some things other boys could only dream of. I became acquainted with some railroad switchmen and engine men that I would later be working with when I was yard clerking summers in college. All of those men spoke highly of your grandfather -- even those who were hard to get along with. It was probably the summer of '51 when I was clerking that a switchman who's nickname was "Sky Hook" said to me when we were alone, "I remember when your dad. He clerked here nights at Heights Yard when I was switching at night. When I was young I was a drinking alcoholic. Some nights I would be so drunk that I endangered my life and the life of others. There were times when they would lock me in the caboose and switch cars with a short handed crew. Some of those nights Wallace, who was a clerk, did some switching in my place. I have never forgotten what he did for me."

Stewardship is more than church giving it has to do with a style of living life. Your grandmother and grandfather Olsen did fairly well at it.

Just last week a parishioner gave me a definition of stewardship. The broad nature of the definition is good. I think your grandparents in many ways practiced it. The definition goes like this.

STEWARDSHIP IS . . .

Taking care of what you have!

Some of it is knowing what you have;
more of it is caring for how it's used.

If we are worried about not having enough,
we grasp for more and hold tightly.

If we are grateful for even a little,
we find joy in it and want to share.

Stewardship avoids waste and makes things last;
it improves the little and extends the much.

Stewardship is wise management,
it envisions the possibilities and plans ways to
make them happen.

It is caring about your work
and having it help others.

It is taking time to enjoy life,
and also wanting that joy for our neighbors.

A stewardess is one who looks out for passengers;
it is not just things, it is people.

Stewardship is being thoughtful and kind,
it is being honest and fair.

Stewardship is not only cleaning out your car,
but offering a ride.

Stewardship is free and spontaneous,
it is also trained talent and disciplined doing.

Stewardship is human purpose being fulfilled;
it is God's purpose being followed.

It is faith-response to God's generosity,
it is love-response to human need.

Stewardship is not claiming ownership,
it is trusting an inheritance.

Stewardship is caring for God's world and all its
people,

it is building up God's church and supporting
God's servants.

That's not a bad definition. It's a pretty good way of living. I believe, your grandparents worked at it and did well.