

November 8 2015

Scripture Lessons ~

Psalm 136

1 Kings 17: 8-16

Mark 12:38-44

Sermon *Living to Give*

Seldom do I give a stewardship sermon. Not because they are not needed, but because it seems somewhat unseemly to me for a minister to get up and talk about money. I don't know why that is. You may have noticed that I try to stay as far away from money as I can. In the where I served when the deacons brought the money to the front during the offering, I stayed away from it. I didn't want to look like Cuba Gooding, Jr. in the movie Jerry McGuire who said, "Show me the money!" Did most of you see that movie? Just a few. Some of you are familiar with it.

Jesus certainly spoke often about money. It may be that my distaste for speaking about your giving is because it may seem to some that I was begging for more money; begging so that I might have a salary increase. In part, it may be that I think the church should not have to ask; that instead, all God's children should want to give generously. In part, it may be that I already believe that many of you are giving a tithe and some of you may be giving above the tithing amount.

I am not seeking to be a philanthropist. Someone once said a philanthropist was a person who had trained himself to grin while his pocket was being picked by his conscience. No I am seeking Christian givers who give because they love the Lord and know that giving is the right thing to do.

You do not have to endure a stewardship sermon very often but you can take it today and then pray about it.

Mark 12 beginning with verse 38 as Jesus taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and be greeted with respect in the market-places and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." He 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.'

On the eve of their arrival at the temple meant nothing special to the scribes, wealthy merchants, and prominent members of the community. They came to the temple regularly and were familiar with the pomp, circumstance, splendor, and the procedures of the rites and rituals. They had their servants make sure that the pleats on their robes were neatly folded and that the tassels designating their standing were still in place. They wanted to look impressive as they paraded through the outer courtyards into the court of Israel. Some probably sent courtiers to invite one of the priestly families to dine with them after the morning sacrifices. That wouldn't hurt their standing. It might even help land a wealthy husband for one of their daughters or a bride with a large dowry for one of their sons. They routinely checked the ornate bags in which they carried their temple offerings to make sure they had the proper coins and that the amount was sufficient for persons of their rank. They did this all the time. There was nothing extraordinary or unusual about it.

Across town in a dimly lit, but immaculately swept hovel, all thoughts and energies were aimed toward the next day. The widow meticulously cleaned her threadbare shawl, pensively wondered whether she would have the stamina to make her way through the crowd of worshippers, and she checked for the hundredth time the faded cloth in which she had tied her temple offering. Earlier that week she had bargained hard with the baker to purchase a loaf of bread and have something left for the temple, but she had managed. After all, she couldn't approach the house of God empty-handed. She closed her eyes. She could almost see the stately columns of the temple, hear the bleating of sheep, and smell the pungent odor of the sacrifices.

At the moment she lived to give her offering to God. Widows like her, rulers like Herod, and haughty troops like the Romans would come and go. As long as Israel remained faithful, the temple and the blessings of God found there would endure forever.... Her means were modest. She had lost her husband, her children and many of her friends. If something did not happen soon, she would lose even the tumbled-down walls and roof around her. But she lived to give her offering to God. She wanted to tell God, "I'm thankful, I still have you."

Out of the large group of worshippers, she was the one Jesus noticed. Of her Jesus said, "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." He saw that she lived to give.

Now think about this woman. She is what most of us would label as a victim. Her husband has died, so now she is the victim of the economic and social injustices of this world....But note what she does. She turns that whole system of accumulation and acquisition on its head. She gives all. In so doing, she becomes a

judgment upon the cautious, miserly, grasping culture where most of us live and she shows a way to a different world. Jesus, being a representative of that other way, that alternative world, praises her.

That's enough storytelling. Now for some meddling. About what did we think last night? Surely none of us were vain or shallow enough to sit up wondering how others would respond to our apparel, appearance, or participation in worship, were we? But as we went down our Saturday routine, did we give any thoughts at all to worship. If we did, what were those thoughts? Did we look forward to offering praises to God, or did we hope to hear a stirring anthem? Or a rousing sermon? Did we take time to notice whether anyone we know could use an invitation or ride to church or did we hope the service would end early enough not to interfere with our plans? Did we give any thought to our regular offering or to the special needs that might have arisen in the congregation, the community, or the larger church, or did we write the check without pausing simply out of habit.

As we worship today, will Jesus notice what we have to offer? Will he be able to say to us, "They live to give?"

Living to give seems contrary to our way of life. We define success in terms of what can be taken from life, not in terms of what can be given. That holds as true in the Church as it does in the marketplace.

Following the advice of trained consultants we market churches much as we market consumer goods. We focus on what the church has to offer. Some of us offer to save others from hell. We invite people to come to church so they can gain salvation. There is nothing wrong with focusing on eternal salvation, but is that all there is to being a part of the church?

Others of us offer a more earthly approach. Some churches build gymnasias, and racquetball courts, offer aerobic classes and jazzercises and provide childcare and nutrition classes. Consultants assure us that congregations that offer these and other services are the most attractive. There is nothing wrong with such programs and services, but they all focus on the individual and what that individual can receive from the church. Is that all there is to being a part of the church?

Jesus took a different approach. He called his initial followers to be "fishers of people," He called them into ministry. He asked them to do something; to tend sheep, to care for the sick, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to visit the imprisoned, and to preach the good news. He focused on services to render, not goods to receive. He praised her because she was more interested in taking part in God's presence than in buying some product the temple had to offer.

Mark doesn't say what happened in the temple after the poor widow gave her offering. A few people may have snickered and taunted her. Some may have aimed disapproving glances in her direction. Many may simple have turned away to keep from shaming her.

For her part, her eyes may have avoided the crowd. Her shoulders may have been as stooped when she left the temple as they were when she came. But when she returned home there surely was energy in her step and a glow in her heart. Unlike so many of the scribes, wealthy merchants, and prominent members of the community, she left that morning she had participated in worship and in ministry generously, intentionally, and with integrity. She had given her all. She had held nothing back. Ironically, she had, returned home more full than those who given only part. Her giving made her alive.

Sometimes we are surpassed by grace in spite of ourselves. Sometimes the planning and execution by others leads to rich experiences of worship from which we leave feeling filled. But what might happen if we gave our all? If we entered the sanctuary intending and planning to offer our praises to God in song, just how powerfully might the Spirit move in among us? If we came intending and planning to pray, how awesome might be our silences! If we honestly dedicated the best of our talents and time working together and to building community, how filled and fulfilled might our lives become! If we truly committed our financial and physical resources to ministry in the name of Jesus the Christ, how many people in our country and beyond might have their lives changed by the love and grace of God? Giving brings faith to life.

Jesus noticed the widow who gave everything she had. That act does not romanticize poverty. There is nothing sacred about being hungry, cold, homeless or powerless. The presence of the poor illustrates the need for church and its mission. But sometimes people who live near the edge of existence see things more clearly than those of us who have plenty. They see without impairment what it is that is essential.

The widow praised by Jesus knew she had nothing and no one on whom to rely but God. Her gift told God, "I have nothing more to offer. Take and use me."

We have much more to offer than that poor widow, but we are not that different from her. People like us, leaders like ours, and problems like those which face us come and go. God endures forever. Living means giving no less than our very selves to God; giving no less than our very selves to God means coming truly alive.

Think about it. Pray about it. For the love of God, do something about it.

Gracious God, it is you who created us and it is to you that we should be thankful, but Lord, often we are thankless creatures more concerned about what is in this life for us than we of what we could do for our communities. We pray that you might help us re-arrange our priorities, giving us resolve for service. We ask these things in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus. AMEN