



KALAMAZOO

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN

CHURCH

Sermons

Fearless Giving

October 9, 2016 – 21st Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 12.41-44 and Luke 10.25-37

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It would be easy to romanticize this poor widow whom Jesus so heartily commends. It would be easy to see her poorly dressed, slipping up to something like the Salvation Army collection bucket at Christmas and plopping in her last two cents as we bystanders wait and watch, hoping for a happy ending like an O. Henry short story were she ends up being befriended and loved and provided for, happily ever after. It would be easy. And it would be wrong.

Widows in the time of Jesus were vulnerable people. As we heard last week, they could not expect fair treatment from the justice system. They were viewed with suspicion. And they were seen as fair game for fraudulent religious leaders who cheated them out of what assets they might have had after their husbands' deaths. We recall Jesus rebuking the scribes and Pharisees calling them 'devourers of widows' houses.' No specific rights of inheritance are provided for widows in the Hebrew law which is why the Old Testament prophets cry out, again and again, for their fair and just treatment, and why the psalmist names God 'the father of the fatherless and the protector of widows.' Death before old age was seen in some quarters as a punishment for sin, and so the death of a husband led to some of his assumed sin spilling over and onto his surviving widow. Walking the widow's path was not easy. Still isn't in many churches. I recall a fine Christian woman who left a church in which she'd been highly active and when I asked her why, she said, 'You have no idea how hard it is to be a single woman in church.' She was right; I didn't.

So, see this widow for who she is. Mourning still, shabbily dressed in her poverty, creeping along like a shadow on the wall, trying to be invisible as she slips up to the nearest of the 13 trumpet shaped offering chests in the court of the enormous Jerusalem temple, there to cast in her last two coins. Does she pause to pray as she makes her offering? Or does she leave as quickly as

possible, having gone all in on God, hoping no one sees her, let alone speaks to her. Her own house gone, spurned and alone, we know not where she went after she left the house of God. Nameless, she disappears from the gospel narrative.

But Jesus sees her. Jesus sees everything. Jesus sees the whole scene. He sees affluent folks making a show of putting in large sums, and he does not judge them. Rather, he commends the widow because she put in not what she could afford, didn't merely tithe, didn't go fifty-fifty with God – one coin for God, and one for herself, didn't spend her last dollar on a lottery ticket with the promise to God that if she won, she'd join those making large gifts. No, she, like Jesus himself, was all in on God when she dropped in her last two cents. I wonder if her favorite psalm was Psalm 40, especially where it says, "The only thing you want, O God, is our whole being, all the time." Because that's the bet she's placed. And hers is an act of immeasurable faith because we have no idea where she went, how her life unfolded. This is no "God wants you to be rich" pseudo-gospel as is preached in some churches where the more we give, the more we'll be blessed. Funny how the preachers of those churches fly in their private jets while their congregants keep waiting and waiting for their turn at the big money. But with regard to this widow, we only know that Jesus commended her in the highest possible terms. She has put in more than all of them, he said. Her two cents worth is the greatest of all gifts. We might well ask, "Why so?"

The disciples' responses to this episode and to Jesus' words are not recorded. But perhaps we can guess at theirs by observing our own reactions, by what we hear whispering in our own minds and hearts. Maybe we're saying inside, 'You've got to be kidding; I'm not giving everything I have to the church. Get real. Doesn't Jesus know how the world/temple/church work, what makes it go round? He ought to be up there glad handing the affluent who could underwrite his ministry.' But here's Jesus doing it again – seeing and loving and rejoicing in those society casts as losers. And we can be comforted that when we find that loser label affixed to us by virtue of our own folly or by implacable circumstance, Jesus will see us as he sees this widow, with compassion.

There are a lot of widows in the Bible. It would make a good Bible study to go through all their stories. And I've known a lot of widows in the church. I knew two far-less-than-affluent widows who lived next door to each other who decided to share all their newspaper and magazine subscriptions. Can you guess why? So that together they could give more to the church. Fearless giving. I knew an affluent widow who said to me as her pastor, "I don't have any particular talents, Larry, but I'm good at giving money away, and I want you to help me make sure I'm doing the most good I possibly can." Fearless giving. I heard the story of a destitute widow who gave her church two dollars a week, cash money, who was visited by church deacons who told her it would be okay if she just kept her money and spent it meeting her own needs. To them she replied, "If you'll not accept my offering to the church, you'll take away my last shred of dignity." Fearless giving. And once upon a time, there was a widow who cast her last two coins into the temple treasury. Fearless giving.

There's an old preacher's story of an affluent and haughty widow who died and went to heaven. St. Peter was showing her around and took her past many fabulous homes. She saw on one great front porch the grocery clerk with whom the widow had always been frustrated because she was slow and always wanted to chat about nothing. The clerk's home was lovely and her porch crowded with friends. The widow looked closely at another large and lovely home thinking she recognized the occupant, and sure enough, it was a homeless man she had crossed the street to avoid many a time, shiftless beggar that he was. On and on she went, seeing the lovely, happy homes of all those folks she thought of as losers. And she thought to herself, well, if they have houses like that, I'm going to be spending eternity in a palace. Finally, way out past the great homes, St. Peter stopped by a shack made of corrugated metal, scrap lumber, and plastic sheeting, like something we'd see throughout post-hurricane Haiti. St. Peter turned and said to the woman, "this is your eternal home." She sputtered and fumed that this simply was not acceptable until St. Peter stopped her, and said, "I'm sorry, but this is all we could build with what you gave."

The underrated theologian John Wesley said, “Earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can.” And another Englishman named Winston Churchill, not renowned by any means for his churchmanship, said, “We make a living by what we get; but we make a life by what we give.” Good sayings to ponder as we make our stewardship commitment for the coming year.

It’s been over fifty years since I, as a ninth grader, sat in confirmation class in my home church. There I spent a couple of hours each Sunday afternoon for twenty weeks, all leading up to a compelling rite of passage ritual through which I became an adult and a member of the church. I had a saintly teacher for that class, the Rev. Dr. John R. Waser, who taught me so much that still shapes my Christian walk. He spent one whole class on the Christian approach to money, and it was there I learned that I, as a disciple of Jesus, was to ‘give ten percent of whatever I earned – including my allowance - to the church, to save ten percent, and to live on the remaining eighty percent.’ Dr. Waser said tithing, giving ten percent, was one of the most crucial and foundational spiritual practices. So, I have lived by that 10/10/80 rule ever since and have found it a good way to live. And, naively, I assumed back then that all Christians handled money this way, because Dr. Waser said that’s what Christians do. And so, I was more than a little surprised when I became a pastor and learned this was not the practice of all Christians, that most Christians give something less than three per cent. I’ve thought sometimes we might, as a country, survive financial vicissitudes a bit better if we all lived by the 10/10/80 rule.

Let me confess to you that my favorite guilty pleasure television show is *Dancing with the Stars*. Any fans here? In a recent season, one of the best ever, one of the contestants had lost both her legs below the knee to bacterial meningitis. And yet she danced so beautifully so artfully on her prosthetic legs and feet, and she had such a great spirit. After one of her dances, she and her partner were asked what they had learned through the challenges of learning a new dance every week with her significant physical challenges, and they answered: We’ve learned it’s not what we have; it’s not what we don’t have. It’s what we give. [Amy Purdy and Derek Hough].

My favorite biblical scholar, the late Robert Farrar Capon, argued that we seriously misconstrue Jesus' most famous parable, that of the Good Samaritan, if we think it nothing more than an exhortation to help other people. Capon argues it is really about sacrifice. He writes:

The Samaritan goes to the man on the ground – the surrogate for our Savior [who also came down and was beaten and left to die] – and he involves himself in his passion [a word which after all means “suffering”]. He binds up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine – all acts of kindness to be sure, but also acts that any normal person would find inconvenient, distasteful, and depriving, not to mention expensive, of both time and resources. Moreover, he puts the man on his own animal, thus effectively dying to his own comfort and to whatever prospects he may have had of accomplishing his own journey in good time. Next, he brings him to an inn and takes care of him for the whole night, further interrupting his own progress and frustrating a travelling man's dearest wish, namely a peaceful [drink] in the motel bar and an early, quiet bed after a hard day on the road. And as if all that weren't enough, he gets up in the morning, goes down to the front desk, and books the mugging victim in for an indefinite stay, all expenses paid – room, meals, doctors, nurses, medicines, health club – no questions asked. To sum it up, the Samaritan lays down a very good approximation of his life for someone who isn't even his friend, simply because he, as also an outcast, finally has found someone who lives in his neighborhood, namely, the place where the discards of respectable religiosity are – the lost, the last, the least, the little, the losers, and the dead.

The Samaritan in this story sacrificed his time, he sacrificed his money, he sacrificed his own schedule, he sacrificed his own comfort, he sacrificed his

own mode of transportation, he even – unlike the priest and the Levite - sacrificed his fear of being contaminated by the victim's blood in order to help another child of God. He alone, not the good religious folks, had the eyes to see the stranger in the ditch had a lot in common with himself.

Each of us would do well to ask 'what have I sacrificed?' in the name and for the sake of Jesus. Has my giving to the church been substantial enough to cause me not to be able to do something or buy something I'd really like, or is my giving just what I can afford? Am I making room in my calendar to volunteer to help some folks I'm not real comfortable around, or am I just busy going to meetings? Have I been in the line to donate blood, or do I just assume someone else will do that? Have I been willing to sacrifice an opinion through deep conversation with someone with whom I differ, or do I just talk and talk and talk -and Facebook - with the like-minded? The kind of love Jesus talks about and lives, and finally dies for, always costs us something, always involves sacrifice, if it's truly Christian love.

One of the leaders of a church I once served recently put it this way to her congregation:

Dear Friends,

This past year I pledged \$6000 to First Presbyterian Church. There are tons of things that I would love to do with that money (fly to Singapore to visit my nephews, buy scones every morning at Baker's & Co., renovate my kitchen), but instead, I dedicated it to the church's annual operating budget. Why?

So that there would be lights and heat and functioning coffee pots for the amazing conversations that unfold at the Fellowship of the Bean each Sunday morning. So that men and women in AA, many of them younger than I, can have a safe space to meet each day without feeling judged or shamed. So that men who have lost everything can spend one week in our midst, knowing what it feels like to be an honored guest; knowing what it feels like to not be hungry anymore. So that a church

family can gather at the Columbarium and say a final goodbye to a husband, father, and grandfather who is sorely missed. So that we can tap our toes and be moved by God's spirit every time the chancel choir rises to sing a new anthem.

So that there is signage to help guide newcomers, comfortable bathrooms for people with wheelchairs and walkers, and outdoor lighting for all those evening committee meetings. So that high schoolers could learn about peacemaking while forging international friendships and worshipping twice a day at Iona Abbey. So that even toddlers will know there is a place for them here to giggle and squeal — in our well -maintained nursery or outside in the new community playground. So that we have a top notch web site and social media presence that tells all of these stories to our neighbors and anyone seeking the love and community that is offered here. We cannot do any of this without the generosity of people like you and me.

She concluded her words by asking “What will you give this coming year?”

And that's the question, isn't it? It's really the question Jesus was raising with his disciples in his commendation of the widow. It's the question he's raising with us. Are we going to give like that widow deciding not on 'so many dollars' per week but rather on what portion, what percentage of our income will give to further the work of God's kingdom through this good church? Are we going to give so that it costs us something, perhaps a trip to Singapore or a daily trip to Starbucks or McDonalds? Are we going to give not as mere duty or obligation but because we're placing our bets where Jesus and this widow placed theirs, on God, all in, rather than on what makes sense according the worldly wizards of finance?

As we make our stewardship decision and commitment, it is important for us to remember that generosity has nothing at all to do with how much money

we have, but rather with what kind of heart we have. Not all affluent people are generous like the two who are funding the Foundation for Excellence and those who funded the Kalamazoo Promise, but thanks be to God for those that are. And by no means are all people of lesser means generous with their resources, always looking for how they can ease the way for others. Generosity is not measured by how much we have but by whether we have the heart of a Scrooge or a Grinch, or the heart of a John Wesley or my saintly confirmation class teacher or this widow Jesus commended so grandly.

Just as there are different kinds of widows, there are different kinds of people here this morning. And our gifts will differ in quantity. That is as it was in our story and how it will always be. But what will make us one is if our gifts are like that of the particular widow in our story – fearless, sacrificial, generous, and a witness to where our deepest allegiance and most profound hope lie – with the God we know in Jesus whose grace and love, healing and inspiration, enfold and empower us, this day and unto our life eternal.

Amen +