

A Life of Generosity
1 Kings 17: 8-16; Mark 12: 38-44
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I. Introduction

I got back yesterday evening from West River where a lot of our families are down this weekend celebrating at our first family camp, and it was a ton of fun. And as I was getting ready to leave yesterday afternoon, one of the parents came up to me and said, "So, what are you preaching on tomorrow?" And I said, "Well, I'm talking about money and stewardship." And he said, "Oh, well, this is a good Sunday for me to miss." And he was sort of half-joking and I sort of half-laughed, but what I wanted to say without sounding too much like a preacher is, no, this is the Sunday that you really should be there because when we talk about stewardship, we are talking about one of the most theologically meaty topics that we have to discuss as a church because this is really where the rubber hits the road for a lot of us. And as many theologians have noted and Pastor John Maxwell has said very succinctly, our checkbooks are theological statements because they tell us in a way that is as clear as any what it is we value and what it is that we believe.

Now if you're a visitor and you're kicking yourself that you happened into church on stewardship Sunday, please don't because this is not about your offering in church today. What it is about is how our giving fosters our spiritual growth. And so, hopefully you'll hear something here that you can take back to your home church and start to live out there rather than here. But we're coming to the end of our stewardship series and stewardship as we have talked about is how we use all of the gifts that God has given us.

We have spent some time over the last several weeks looking at how we use our time, because our time and our money are such powerful indicators of what it is we value and two of the areas that we struggle a great deal with in terms of how we use them productively. And the sort of through theme throughout these weeks has been that we live lives by and large that are very scattered and very dissipated, and so when you come to church and hear, share and talk about the volunteer work you can do, our initial emotional responses often, "How do I squeeze one more thing into my life?" What's interesting and wonderfully paradoxical is that when we create the space to do the work that God has called us to do, a lot of the things that dissipate us fall into better perspective. Likewise, none of us feels as though we have enough money. And frankly, it doesn't matter how affluent you get, I don't know anybody that feels like they've got enough now, there's always just a little bit more and then we'd have it all taken care of.

One of the wonderful paradoxes of talking about money in the church is that when we use our money to do God's work, a lot of the other pieces come into better perspective and we start to realize when we make choices that we don't always need all of the

things that we think that we need. So, stewardship is a very powerful counterweight to a society that tells us that we are what we own and that our greatest fulfillment is made through buying things.

II. Zarephath

This is what our wonderful lectionary text from the Hebrew Scriptures is about this morning. This story takes place in the middle of the ministry of Elijah, and Elijah spent much of his time critiquing the reign of King Ahab. King Ahab was one of our less successful Israelite kings. And in this particular story Ahab's wickedness has resulted in all of Israel being punished with a drought. So, God tells Elijah, "Go to Ahab and tell him that a drought is about to come because of his wickedness," and then God says to Elijah, "and after that you better run because Ahab's not going to be happy." So, Elijah goes and tells Ahab, "You're about to be punished with a drought," and then Elijah takes off and he actually leaves Israel entirely and goes to God's suggestion to a town outside of Israel called Zarephath, which is a coastal city that was in those days in Philistine territory. And God tells Elijah to go to a widow and be cared for there.

Well, right from the beginning of that story, we should know that something unusual is going to happen because widows are the most vulnerable folks in that society. They've got limited legal rights and limited property rights and limited ways of earning an income, so they are very vulnerable. And so, this is an unexpected directive to Elijah because one would have expected God to send Elijah to someone who had plenty to spare to take care of the prophet during this drought. But Elijah goes to this widow and you could tell right from the beginning of the story that she is a good woman, and Elijah says, "Can you bring me a drink of water?" Now remember this is a drought so getting a drink of water is a significant thing. This isn't just going into the house and turning on the spigot. Water is very scarce. But the woman doesn't hesitate. She knows she's got an obligation to extend hospitality and she turns immediately to go get some water for Elijah. And then Elijah pushes her and he says, "While you're doing that, can you get me a little bread?" And she turns to Elijah and she says, "Honestly, all I've got is this tiny, little bit of flour, this tiny, little bit of oil, and that's all my son and I have to live on. We've got nothing to spare. So, I want to be helpful. I just don't have it."

And Elijah says, "Here is God's promise: Make me a little bit of bread first, and your flour and your oil will last as long as the drought lasts." And the woman does it. This is the miracle in this story for me. The miracle is not that God multiplies the flour and the oil throughout the drought. The miracle is this incredibly vulnerable woman is able to step out in faith and make a little bit of bread for the stranger that she doesn't know, she's not even Jewish, and she's able to step out in faith to care for him. And her ability to do that then opens her up to receive the blessing that God wants to share with her.

Now I want to be careful here because this can sound very much like the prosperity Gospel that I often mock from the pulpit, appropriately, because it's horrible theology and it's horrible manipulation, and this is not a story about giving significantly so that you

can receive significant financial blessings from God. That's not what this story is about. It is, however, a story about how generosity opens us up to experience life in new ways.

My friend, Ann Michel, wrote a wonderful article this summer about a book called *The Paradox of Generosity*, which was a study that some sociologists did and published through Oxford last year about the impact that generosity has on the quality of our lives. And a lot of detail went through looking at how generosity impacts our emotional and physical well-being. And among the things that it found that generosity did was it promoted greater happiness and physical health, that generosity provides us with meaningful social roles and a means of developing healthy self-identity, that generosity expands our intellectual and emotional horizons by exposing us to the needs of others. This is, of course, one of the great gifts of all of our powerful serving ministries in our church. So, what we see in this story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath is this call even in the face of not knowing exactly where all of the resources we are going to need comes from, to step out and learn how to be generous with what we have, so that in that process our lives can be transformed.

III. Widow's Mite

Our lectionary texts from the Gospel of Mark this morning picks up on this theme of this generous widow. Again, it's important to note that the passage starts off with Jesus roundly criticizing the spiritual leaders of his day for manipulating vulnerable people into giving their material blessings, so this is a word of caution to preachers like myself that are in a position to influence and manipulate people who are vulnerable, to exploit them financially. And Jesus is very, very clear on the wickedness of that and has a lot of pretty strong language to say about people who wear long robes and have the best seats in the house of worship, right? But then he turns around and he asks his disciples to look at this widow who has put in these two copper coins into the temple treasury. And Jesus is well aware of all of those sounds of the money being put in by the people who had money. And he's also well aware of how that impacts our valuing of people and their gifts, and that the people in charge were likely to completely ignore the widow who had put in her two coins and pay a lot of respect and attention to the people who had poured in a lot more money. And the disciples also would have a tendency to value more those who could give more.

And Jesus' words are very instructive, and he says to them, "That woman put in more than all those other folks." Well, what's the obvious implication there? Obviously it didn't have to do with the church budget, right, because all of those folks put in more to the church budget than the widow did. So, in what respect is her gift more significant? Because it meant more to her. Her stretching was her way of learning and increasing her generosity and in that process becoming a more whole and happy and vital disciple.

So that Jesus' message is that if we want to learn generosity, it's a muscle in just the same way that we work out and try to build all of our muscles. So, when we are trying to work out in a gym -- I say this theoretically because I've never worked out in a gym -- but I understand theoretically that what happens is you're pushing yourself, right, you're

trying to make your muscles hurt because that's how they get stronger. And Jesus' message is that if we want to build our generosity muscle, we've got to stretch that a little bit and giving away that feels uncomfortable for us at that moment. We don't want to injure ourselves, and sometimes people over-exercise and can injure themselves, but healthy exercise involves stretching that muscle to a place that is uncomfortable so that it continues to get stronger.

And learning generosity is the same process. Very few of us are built to be generous. Some are more generous than others by nature but none of us come with this as an inherent gift. It is a skill that we learn and we develop, and we need to learn it and develop it if we're going to live whole and rich lives. So, Jesus' advice to us is, how do you stretch yourself to learn how to be generous with your time and your money, so that healthy giving in both of those areas invites us to go to a place that is going to feel uncomfortable and maybe even a tiny bit risky as we stretch ourselves to learn how to be generous.

Some of our political candidates have talked with an interesting and unusual regularity about tithing over this election cycle, and tithing is an interesting and frankly fairly complex witness in scripture that I'm not going to try to unpack in the next couple of minutes. But what I think is at the heart of the call to tithe is not so much the number but is again this invitation to move in our giving to a place that feels a little uncomfortable and a little risky. Some of you have heard one of my favorite stewardship stories which is about a chicken and a pig who were walking down a road. It's a true story. And they got to a diner and outside the diner is a big sign that says "Ham and Egg Breakfast Special." And the chicken looks at the pig and says, "That sounds pretty good. What do you think?" And the pig says, "Well, I don't know. For you, it's a contribution. For me, it's a total commitment."

IV. Conclusion

God is always looking for a total commitment from us. God wants all of who we are. God does not look for the scraps or the leftovers or the pieces that we can give away and it doesn't make any difference to us. God wants all of who we are. God has given us all of who we are and all of what we have and God loves us with a passion that encompasses all of us. And in responding to that, our invitation is to make a total commitment of who we are to God's work in the world and to building the kingdom that God invites us to build through the power of the Holy Spirit.

So, I want to invite you all to think about that this week as we move towards Pledge Sunday next Sunday because this is about gaining perspective. And I read a wonderful quote this past week that said, "The richest person is not the one who has the most but the one who needs the least." And I think what we have there is an echo of John Wesley's call to us to understand all of what we have as being God's and to instead of trying to figure out how much of my stuff I give to God's work, to understand it all to be God's and then have to figure out what do I need to keep to live a whole and purposeful life.

Each week over the last five weeks you've received a card in your bulletin, you've got a sixth one today that is all of the first five were about the program ministries of our church, the one today is about the administrative ministries of our church. What I would invite you all to pray on this week is in all of those areas in our serving, in our learning, in our caring, in our sharing, where have you heard God calling you to engage? Where are those places do your gifts and graces meet the world's greatest need? I want you to think about that and pray about it this week and pray about your financial giving as well. "Where is the place that my giving starts to feel like I'm being stretched? Where am I learning what it means to be generous?"

At the core of our understanding of who God is is a God who has poured out into us all of the blessings that give our lives meaning and purpose and an invitation for us to likewise be channels of that grace to the world. Stewardship is a process of learning how to widen that channel, how to more and more every day become the vehicle through whom the power of the Holy Spirit moves so that the world might be transformed.

Amen.