

Epworth Chapel on the Green
November 8, 2009
Pentecost 23
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

I Kings 17:8-16
Psalm 146
Hebrews 9:24-28
Mark 12:38-44

Our Old Testament and Gospel lessons today introduce us to two widows, and in the process introduce us once again to ourselves. In the case of the Gospel lesson, I can recall many times hearing this text preached when I was younger, and every single time do you know what the subject of the sermon was? You guessed it -- *stewardship*.

And indeed, this widow woman who comes to the temple and gives away all of what amounts to very little is a great example of someone preachers could put before their congregations and say, “become more like this woman.”

This is definitely a stewardship kind of text that calls for a stewardship kind of sermon. So I’m going to take the bait and oblige. But before you get up and stampede for the doors, or before you “tune me out,” please wait. (Davis, bar the doors!)

This Gospel lesson calls for a stewardship sermon, yes. But I submit to you that the primary target audience for the sermon is not *parishioners*. Yes, you heard me correctly.

But who, then, is the target audience?

A closer look at the context surrounding this text will help us answer that question.

In the chapter prior to this (chapter 11), Jesus encounters the money changers in the temple, and that scene of anger and indignation literally spills off of the pages of our New Testaments as Jesus condemns the religious leaders for oppressing people in the name of God.

Then at the beginning of chapter 12 (prior to our lesson), Jesus tells the parable of the wicked tenant farmers. In that parable Jesus rebukes the religious leaders as corrupt, unjust stewards of God's Word, who use the Torah to oppress others.

Here in our text this morning, Jesus is at the temple again, and he is warning people again of religious leaders who shamelessly exploit the most vulnerable and helpless in society (the widows) for their own material gain -- all in the name of God and under the guise of religion!

Subsequent to this, chapter 13 begins with the disciples commenting to Jesus about the magnificence of the temple, it's grandeur, it's beauty. Jesus says to them: "not one stone of this place will be left standing." Jesus tells them that the whole structure -- the centerpiece of corruption and exploitation all done in the name of God, is going to become ground zero. The whole shebang is coming under judgment.

If we see our Gospel text within its context, then, we indeed see that this text calls for a message on stewardship. But the target audience for this message is the *church*. The target audience is religious leaders, pastors, and ministry organizations.

And the message to the church, to pastors, to leaders, seems clear: Our stewardship of the resources given by God's people is a sacred trust, for which we will be held accountable. Our stewardship of these resources can either help to liberate people or it can serve to oppress them. And when it comes to the most vulnerable and helpless among us, we should be seeking for ways to give more *to* them, and take less *from* them.

Having said that, there is still a sense in which this Gospel text challenges us as individuals and families as well.

How so?

Jesus says (verse 43) that the poor widow who comes by and drops in what amounts to a few pennies has given more than all the other contributors combined.

How is that possible? In what sense does Jesus mean this?

The answer comes in verse 44: the others who gave did so out of their surplus. The widow did not have a surplus. She did not even have a "plus," let alone a surplus! And she gave anyway.

Jesus and his disciples have been watching in the temple precinct as people pass by the collection boxes with their offerings. At many locations in the temple, boxes made of metal were placed where contributions could be made. Coins were such that the more money the coin was worth, the heavier it was.

Jesus watches as people -- many of them wealthy -- come by and deposit their offerings. In many cases a huge noise was made as the heavy coins landed in the metal container. In a society obsessed with status and prestige, this was a way of trumpeting publicly one's wealth and generosity.

It's a sham, and Jesus exposes it as such, because after most people drop their coins and rattle the box, they return to a comfortable home, and their lifestyle is not affected one bit by what they have just given away. It is feigned generosity. And Jesus exposes it for the hypocrisy that it is.

It is easy for me to look at this and to think: How could people behave like this? How could they do this?

But the truth is that I am very much like them. When the ARC, or Goodwill, or LOVE, Inc. has a need for clothing, what do I do? I go into my closet and I rummage around, and I take several items and put them in a garbage bag. And then someone comes and hauls them off. But when that is done, my closet is still full of clothes, and all I've really given away is what I didn't want, what Jesus might refer to as my "surplus."

And this same dynamic is at work in other areas of my life, including my time and my money. I am prone to give God my leftovers.

The reason the widow lady gave more than all of the others combined is not because of the amount, obviously. The reason she gave more than the others is because of the relationship of what she gave to what was left over. The amount of her gift was not the issue; the issue was what her gift said about her commitment to God, and her trust in God.

I'm becoming convinced that true stewardship is not so much about giving God *all* that you have (although it *is* His). Stewardship is about giving God the *best* of what you have and the *best* of who you are. It's about a decision not to serve God leftovers.

Think back to the principle of the tithe in the Old Testament. The purpose of the tithe in the Old Testament was not just to be able to pay the light bill. The tithe was related closely to the notion of "first fruits" -- of bringing to God the *first* and the *best* of who the people were and what they had. It was a tangible way of putting God first in all things, a recognition that "all things come from Thee, and of thine own have we given thee."

Ultimately, stewardship is about *love*, not guilt. It is about *faith*, not fear. The stories of both of these widows today show us that God desires to help us live from a perspective of *abundance* rather than *scarcity*. They invite us to see that

when we step out in faith, when we give God the *best* of who we are and what we have -- the oil of God's provision will flow in miraculous ways and will bless our lives and the lives of others.

As we come to the table of the Lord this morning, the signs of bread and wine which we receive are reminders to us of the One who gave to the Father the *first* and *best* of what he had and who he was. Ultimately, he gave everything, placing his faith in the Father that it would be enough.

As you come, offer yourself up once again to Jesus who meets you here. Trust him with the very best of *who* you are and *what* you have. Let him prove his faithfulness to you. Then rise up, go forth, and let him use you to touch a broken and hurting world.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.