

What You DO with What You HAVE

Scripture Lessons: Ruth 3: 1–5; 4:13–17, Mark 12:38–44

Mark 12:38-44

As he taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, 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.”

Sermon

Jesus was near the end of his ministry, and headed to Jerusalem. People had seen his life, witnessed his deeds of miracle and mercy, and heard his teachings and commandments. He was facing opposition from lots of directions, mostly because he served the one true God and not the ideas of God they found more comfortable; his teachings were more about how they should live, and he lived what he taught. He invited anyone to live in sacrifice to God and love for all.

The “scribes” were not the secretaries who wrote things down. They were the religious and political powers who interpreted what was written down in Torah – the Law. The Scribes were at the center of power, along with the Pharisees. It was a two-party political system, and the truth is they liked sharing all the power even more than fighting among themselves. They were rich, they lived among the rich, and they paid attention to the rich. It’s amazing how little things have changed among the rich and powerful in twenty centuries.

Oh, they paid attention to the poor, too, because the poor were powerless and could be useful. Any predator looks for the powerless as easy prey. Ironically, the powerful in Jesus’ time thought the poor were there to serve their needs. Things have not changed much there, either.

Jesus was a threat to their living, to their comfort, mostly to their riches and power. No wonder the powerful were willing to take him on. Jesus had rich friends who were devoted to him and to God’s love, but he was popular mostly with the outcasts and the powerless – the poor. Poor widows came to him more often than Scribes.

We are looking at this scripture lesson today because it is the lectionary lesson assigned for the day. Yes, today is the Congregational meeting, and we will present a financial budget for mission next year. There is a big board in the Blinn Room with priorities and costs for managing

the temple we have been given here. Churches are like everyone else. We have to pay bills, and we need money for the mission. We did not pick a scripture to support the need to raise some money. We are not talking about money in worship because it is fall fund-raising time at the church.

We are talking about money because Jesus talked about money – a lot. We are here because we have made a vow to follow Christ, to live after his example and pattern in our time and place. So, we need to learn to see money the way Jesus sees it, so that we can be faithful managers of what God has given to our care.

The church does *not* do fund-raising. In our true and faithful and better moments, we never have. Paying the light bill and salaries and buying curriculum and supporting the larger church and the mission in the community are not matters of selling you on the program. A church should never have to convince its own members of what a fine job we are doing with your money in order to see an increase in your commitment. Worshippers are neither customers nor constituents. We worshippers are members of the body of Christ we call the church. We all know that the only limit to what we can do as Christ's body in this place is how much or little we have for the doing.

Lots of things have changed in America in the last generation – that is, since the 1980's. Politics ushered in a different attitude toward money and charity. Remember? Wealth was celebrated, and “greed is good” became a motto. The way for the country to prosper was for the rich to get richer and charity to “trickle down.” Charities were told to become entrepreneurial, and fund-raising became a competitive sport. Golf and galas, grants and giveaways, the raffles and mass-mailings have raised a lot of money. Fund-raising has become part of college curriculums and a growth industry on its own. “Fund-raising” is always about the totals, the goals and the pledges and the outcomes. Fund-raising has changed the way we see charity. What has not changed all that much is the condition of true, charity giving and the poor. But modern-day Scribes and Pharisees are still putting on their best clothes to be seen at those banquets.

Lots of things have changed in America in the last 50 years –that is, since the 1950's. One of the things that has remained the same is the pattern of personal generosity in our society among people with different levels of wealth and poverty. Our times are really not that much different from the 50's, or from the first century. Did you know that as a percentage of their income, the lower working class is still the most generous economic group in America? The people who live paycheck-to-paycheck and are the closest to the poor give the highest percentage of their income to help others.

Now guess who gives the least? The poor? We would think so. They have little or nothing to give and it sure can't add up to much. But compared to how little they have, they put their few coins in just like the widow. The least generous in our society are still the top 5% of our society – the wealthy who have gotten better off than anyone in the last two decades still do the least for others with what they have. Of course there are people with wealth who are compassionate and generous. Thank God every age has seen great models who give great gifts. But the Scribes and Pharisees of our time still use money as power, still withhold giving to further their own interests, still use and abuse the poor and excuse themselves in some strange kind of entitlement.

“Stewardship” is *not* about fund-raising. Stewardship is about commitment and management and personal generosity. Management is not about the total, but the responsible use of all the parts. Management is about understanding that we are not owners free to do whatever we want with anything we have. We are trustees who care for everything we have been given, and do what the owner would have us do.

In the face of what the culture has done to charity, we need to remember the roots of charity in the church. The word is “charitas.” Yes, it’s Greek. It’s the word we translate grace. It means “love” without stipulations and giving without strings. It means giving to others as freely as we have received. It means coming to church and putting our coins in the plate and giving everything we have and are to God.

Remember the early church? With them, there was a trust in a generous God who gave them every reason to be generous. Sure, God had distributed gifts in varied ways, and wealth in varied amounts. But it was still all God’s. They did not own anything, they just managed what God owned. In the church, they shared everything in common and used everything each of them had for the good of God’s work among them all. Like Paul said, there was no bond or free, no male or female, no Jew or Greek, . . .no rich or poor! *Because* they were all one in Christ – all alike in Christ’s eyes.

Now, most of us are somewhere in-between the rich and poor. And we feel the “squeeze” between personal needs and the needs of others. The main thing is to keep the main thing in mind. Christ loves us and loves others. His presence and grace will help us through time to work out in the patterns and habits of our devotion and our decisions over what to do with all we have been given. The question is NOT the fund-raising question: “What will this organization do with what I give them, and should I give a little more?” The question is the management commitment question: “What should I do with what Christ has given me to manage?”

Let me make a suggestion of a practical and personal exercise: Take an honest look at what you spend on necessities and niceties. Look at what goes to needs and what goes to extras. Be honest about the extras: entertainment, vacations, recreation, dues here and there, now this and that. Write the numbers down where you can see them. Now write down what you have given to charities, to helping organizations – you know, the things you report to the IRS as giving. Look at necessities and niceties and charity against your total income – the total of what God has put in your hands to manage. Finally, write down what you give to the church separately, because church is different and separate. Church is stewardship, not fund-raising. Church does not have grants and galas or a big mailing list. We just have us together as an only source, the members of the body of Christ in this place to do God’s mission for this place.

With all the numbers right there in front of you in black and white, pray. Ask yourself what lessons you can draw about how you manage God’s money, how you might change your spending of God’s money. Ask God what you should do with what God has given you to manage. Yes, some of your responses may be obvious and I suspect you might be a little uncomfortable, but that is the way we grow – through challenge. I do know that it will be easier

than facing the greater condemnation Jesus reserves for Scribes who devour widows. Just remember: whether we give God's money to the church or give it somewhere else good or bad, the truth is we are giving it all away sooner or later. And we all answer to God for our management sooner or later.

We do not give everything we have back to God because Jesus saw a poor widow give everything she had. We give all we have and are to God, and give an account to God for what we do with everything we have, ...because Christ gave everything he had for us. By his gift, we know we will find grace in our giving.

Prayers of the People

Today, the prayers of God's people gather as in most weeks from any concerns – for the sick and grieving, the poor and needy, the troubled world and the disheartened spirit.

But we voice prayers for those who suffer and grieve at the hands of violence at Fort Hood.

Pray for the wounded soldiers and civilians who live closer to the threat to life than we do, but never thought it might come as it did. Pray for their healing in body and spirit.

Pray for the families of too many who died. Pray for friends and loved ones. Pray that they will know the presence and love of a God who knows what it is like to face death because of the world's evil. Pray they will hear God's comfort in their heart-sick spirits.

Pray for sick minds and troubled souls who do crazy things. Pray for people who plan evil and cause suffering. Pray that somehow God and grace will come to them.

Pray for soldiers and civilians in lots of places around the world who live in fear and courage to defend freedom and foster good.

Give thanks for those in the past who have served to protect, and those who have died to defend.

Pray that our nation and society will not discount the cost of their sacrifices. Pray that we will help the injured and damaged who return home and bring living scars with them. Pray that we will give more than lip service to gratitude.

And because Jesus commanded us to do so: pray for our enemies, even those who stand opposite everything we think it right.

Pray that we as Christians will not think so much about whose side God is on, but pray earnestly that we will seek God's side to beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks so that the high cost of war can be applied to the making of peace.

Because he taught us to pray that his will would be done on our earth, in the prayer he gave us...