

Worship Series: “Steps to Stewardship: The Gratitude Path”

“The Widow’s Offering”—Sermon Text: Luke 21:1-4

FUMC Arlington, Texas 76011

20th Sunday after Pentecost: 2 October 2016

“It’s in the homes of spiteful old widows that one finds such cleanliness”

(--Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime & Punishment*, Chapter 1).

Hear God’s word and listen for what the Spirit is saying to the church:

21 He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; 2he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. 3He said, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; 4for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on’ (Luke 21:1-4).

Luke’s Gospel here couples two stories; a warning against showy religion and a validation of a widow’s generosity. The second point is an obvious one. Jesus did not pay tribute to the widow because her gift was small or because she was a widow. Rather Jesus favored her gift symbolized all she had. The basis of good stewardship is not a gift’s amount, but the proportion of faith summoned by the gift.

Nothing necessarily indicates that Jesus had a relationship with the widow—perhaps, but the text does not suggest. Rather she put in her offering because that was part of her training—part of her routine faith discipline. Often we see what people really believe and what they trust by watching their actions, rather than listening to their lengthy professions. Sometimes I tell our confirmation classes, watch and see what “Billy Joe” or “Betty Lou” does because that is a person who lives out her or his Christian vows. I want to say to my confirmation youngsters, “Look here kids” and then point to some faithful individual, “this is how you do the Christian

life.” Most of us learn best by watching. Daniel Boorstin once wrote fifty-five years ago:

In our world of big names, curiously, our true heroes tend to be anonymous. In this life of illusion and quasi-illusion, the person of solid virtue who can be admired for something more substantial than his well-knownness often proves to be the unsung hero: the teacher, the nurse, the mother, the honest cop, the hard workers at lonely, underpaid, unglamorous, unpublicized jobs [Daniel Boorstin, *The Image*, 1961, chapter 2].

Certainly the anonymous and poor widow in Jesus' example of generosity was a person of deep faith. In addition, she was clearly free from fear. Fear creates prejudice and fear stirs resentment. Fear causes many problems between people. We are afraid that others will not respect us and therefore we tend to follow the crowd. This widow clearly did not fear the future for as Jesus tells the disciples, "this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury." She did not fear what her future might hold, but she did what was appropriate to her faith in the moment.

Sometimes we are full of doubts and in our desire to control our future we retire into postures of fear. We all fear many different things, but when fear of the future grips us; fear robs us of present joy. Some fear failure, while others fear success. Some people spend their days and restless nights anxious about what other people think of them. We fear for our children, our health, our nation, and world. At times we fear things that ought to be feared, but too often we fear things that need not be feared. The following scripture offers wise biblical wisdom: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love" (1 John 4:18). In part the widow's lack of fear also helped her embrace gratitude. I suppose I respect the poor widow in Jesus' example of stewardship because she simply appears to be an individual without fear. I wish I could be a person who lived without fear. For those of us who live in constant fear this poor widow is a marvel.

Back in the 1970s the band called "Crosby, Stills and Nash" performed a song called: "Teach your children Well." Teaching continues to be a parent's greatest responsibility along with providing security and sustenance. Teaching gratitude especially in this time of entitlement is part of parental duty. Yet, however grateful children are to parents for love and nurture, a parent's responsibility is to nurture despite a child's gratitude. In a like manner, God does not thank people for their faithfulness. Luke even records in our other lesson from the Gospel Jesus asking such a rhetorical question: "Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded" (Luke

17:9)? Rather, faithfulness to God is the fruit of faith and benefits those who exercise this fidelity. When we forget the boundary line between God and people, then trouble comes to paradise. The people in the Garden painfully learned this lesson (Genesis 2—3).

Today, most of what passes for gratitude is simply social convention. How often do people really pay attention to the things that are going on around them? I have a retired preacher friend, Buzz Stevens, who told me that one day he went into a drug store as he suffered from a number of various maladies. He brought these items to the counter: Extra Strength Tylenol, some Dristan, an elastic knee support, a vaporizer, some Preparation-H, and some medicine for cold sores. As he left the counter, the salesperson said, “Have a nice day.”

How often do we go through the motions of life and miss something of great significance? We tell a wait-person “thank you” when they bring our food and we say thank you when someone opens a door for us. Yet, many of us say plenty of “thank yous” and find ourselves at a loss for words when we sense profound gratitude for an extraordinary kindness shown us. In truth “we can never truly repay our debts of gratitude; we can only pass them along.” Thus, when Jesus asks the question, “Do you thank the slave?” the answer to his rhetorical question is an obvious one: “NO!”

I wonder if a younger version of the poor widow in Jesus’ story could be like Ruth. One of Ruth’s finest attributes is her trait of never giving up. She pursued a link to her mother-in-law long after most people would have given up. In any case, after Ruth’s husband dies, death severs all authentic kinship ties between Naomi and Ruth. Yet, Ruth knows the secret to leading and influencing people—she continues to build relationship. Ruth knows that relationship building is the key to influence and generous association between people. It also is related to gratitude.

This is what God does for those who follow God’s leadership. God continues to come to us in manifold and various ways. The biblical book of Hebrews opens with a magnificent description of our God: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by

the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds” (Hebrews 1:1-2).

Today we see God’s ultimate approach to God’s creatures when we break the body of Christ in communion—God’s Eucharistic feast. The word “eucharist” in Greek means thanksgiving—or showing gratitude. We see this most clearly in Christ’s sharing a sacred meal with all disciples. If you ever doubt that God wants to be in relation with God’s creation and God’s people, then you need look no farther than the table set before you this day. It is the ultimate thanksgiving meal we share with others—and Jesus! Amen.

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