

24th Sunday after Pentecost November 8, 2015
Texts – 1 Kings 17:8-16; Heb. 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Could a poor widow whose offering amounted to only two small copper coins be thought of as generous? Indeed she could if Jesus was the one making such an evaluation!

I have come to believe that generosity has little to do with sizable gifts, or great wealth, or even any material matter. Generosity, I have come to believe, is a spiritual thing. Generosity is a matter of faith, a matter of grace, a matter of our caring and compassion.

I remember as a child my mother once saying, of a particularly generous woman of decidedly limited means, “She doesn’t have two dimes to rub together, but she has a heart of gold, and she would do whatever she could to help someone in need.”

Generosity is not what comes out of your wallet or purse, out of your checkbook or bank account, or out of your investment funds. Generosity is what emanates from your heart – and Jesus taught that it is important what comes out from your heart.

You may remember that Jesus was once challenged by the Pharisees and scribes over the issue of his disciples eating while on the road without washing their hands.

As travelers, they had no opportunity to fulfill this “tradition of the elders,” though Jesus did not offer that as an explanation in his response (Matthew 15:1).

Instead, Jesus replied that a person is not defiled by what goes into his mouth, but that it is important what comes out of a person’s mouth, for what comes from our speaking issues forth from the heart (Matthew 15:18).

For this reason, I invite today to embrace generosity, not only as an important Christian attribute, but also as a characteristic of your own personal stewardship and as a descriptor of our combined support for the mission and ministry of this congregation.

Likely you’ve already noticed how well today’s scripture readings lead us in this direction (but if you haven’t, I’m about to point it out!).

The widow of Zarephath in our First Reading was able to celebrate generosity as her own good fortune as the prophet Elijah blessed her with a jar of meal which was miraculously replenished as she used it, as was, too, her prophet-provided jar of oil constantly full without fail.

Out of each jar she poured, and poured, and poured some more – and always the jars were full! These were unexpected blessings, of course, but neither could be considered either a true windfall or even a glittering example of wealth.

Yes, this was miraculous, but these were things you would find in any ordinary pantry – common peasant food, if you will – but when you’re talking famine, starvation, people going days without anything at all to eat – let’s celebrate generosity!

And the widow’s “mite” in today’s Gospel was just that – a tiny sum, just a little bit, only two small coins, copper, no less, not silver or gold – but because these came from such a poor and destitute widow, Jesus could indeed celebrate her generosity.

And dare I point out that he does so comparatively? You heard the words: “Many rich people put in large sums” (Mark 12:41b). But Jesus said, “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” (Mark 12:43-44).

Most middle or upper-middle class Americans like us don’t really think of themselves as wealthy, but, by global standards, we all are rich – unbelievably rich. People in the poorest nations of the world see us as having jars which are never empty – and, by their standards, that’s a correct assessment.

Our markets and grocery stores have shelves full of food and are stocked daily. Our hospitals have medicine to treat every illness and doctors to attend to our care.

Our power is rarely off and sparkling clean water flows from our taps and faucets. And none of this is true for the poorest people in the most under-developed countries of the world. Their jars are routinely empty; ours hardly ever are.

If wealth or windfall guaranteed generosity, there would be no need for fall stewardship programs or financial campaigns in churches, for we as a congregation would have ample resources and more, and instead of talking about budgetary limitations and restrictions, we would be discussing how best to expand our mission and ministry to use our substantial and even generous offerings.

I love the hope and optimism of the words I just spoke and I believe them with all my heart. Still, some here need to hear another word, a word recognizing current realities, a word of genuine support and encouragement.

Some here have experienced in the current year a reduction in hours or wage; others have experienced job loss. We pray for you and empathize with you, and we understand that you may not be able to take a step up in your financial stewardship, and be as generous as you would like.

This is the opportunity for those of us without such setbacks to step up further and make a difference and, with this understanding, our hope is that we will all embrace generosity together, even those who personally cannot do as much as they would like.

The Christian tradition is that when one cannot respond, others do. We bear each others burdens and offer our help where needed.

My last thought this morning is based on the lesson I have not yet mentioned, our Second Reading from Hebrews. Some might say this is less of a “stewardship text” than the others, but I think just the opposite. We love because God loves us. We give because God has given to us. We are generous because we have a generous God.

This text tells us quite clearly that God sent Jesus “to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Hebrews 9:26). And further it tells us that Jesus will come again “to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (Hebrews 9:28). Forgiveness and salvation – these are the marks and traits of a generous God!

We can never match God’s generosity but we can embrace generosity, both God’s and our own, as we grow in grace, in faith, and in the use of our resources in support of the work of our church and in support of Christ’s mission. May God bless you as you consider your giving for the coming year. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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