

No Money Troubles

In the name of him who put away our sins and paid all our debts by the sacrifice of himself, dear friends in Christ: Ah yes, the uncomfortable topic of stewardship – that is, how we as Christians are to manage, allocate, and share the resources the Lord has entrusted to our care and put them to use for the spread of the Gospel and the building up of his kingdom. I don't like talking about it. The Christian Church really gets a black eye due to all those pathetic TV preachers for whom it is the *only* topic. "Send me your 'seed gift' and God will bless you a thousand-fold." Sadly, their distortions have fueled the widely held myth that all the church and its preachers want is your money. I'm hesitant to throw fuel on that fire.

On the other hand, you've probably noticed that I don't go out of my way to avoid sensitive issues. My call is to proclaim God's Word to you. All of it. And so when the topic of stewardship comes up in the appointed readings, it would be negligent for me *not* to talk about it. It is, after all, an integral part of every Christian's discipleship. What you do or don't do with the time, treasure, and talents the Lord has given you is important; and it can be a pretty good indicator of your spiritual health. It says a lot about where your heart is, what your priorities are, and how much trust you really have in the Lord.

It's worth pointing out too that Jesus thinks stewardship is important. In today's Gospel we heard how Jesus stationed himself next to one of the collection boxes in the Temple and sat there watching people as they made their contributions. The Greek word for "watch" there means to observe carefully or study intently. So he was paying very close attention to people and what they gave. Let me suggest that he still is. And since he thinks it's important, we should too. We don't want to have any troubles with money in our walk of faith.

You've probably heard it said that the Lord loves a cheerful giver. It's true. St. Paul says so in his second letter to the church at Corinth. That really helps us understand the Christian concept of giving. It's not a "you *have to*"; it's a "you *get to*". In Lutheran parlance we'd say it's not Law; it's Gospel. What I mean is this: a Christian understands that everything he or she has is a gift of God. We *are* nothing and we *have* nothing that we have not been given. And God gives to us freely – it's his very nature to do so. And so a Christian sees giving as an opportunity to participate in the work of God. It's a means of expressing the godly character that is being developed in us by the work of his Holy Spirit. God loves giving. And so a child of God finds joy in being like God who loves giving. It's that simple. And if, on the other hand, you see the invitation to give as an obligation or onerous duty to perform – something you *have to* do or else God will be angry – then you really don't get it. It's better that you don't give anything if that's the way you look at it; because then no matter how much you have or how much you give, you really do have money troubles.

But if God loves a cheerful giver, we find in a couple of today's readings some other features of Christian giving that God delights in. And interestingly enough, they're both demonstrated for us by poor widows – people who would have been on the very bottom of the economic scale in ancient times. I find that fascinating. Several weeks back we heard Jesus say how hard it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. And now when we see examples of godly giving, we're on the opposite end: the poorest of the poor. Why is that? It's because a rich person is more likely to make an idol of his wealth. That's what he places his trust in. Money, he thinks, it's what's going to see him through life's problems. And so he's

always guarding it, stock piling it, and carefully hoarding it away because he never knows when he might need it. He has to be prepared for whatever might come. The person who is poor is forced to look at things differently. There's no money there to trust in, and so it's less likely to become a god. The poor person is forced to find something else – or more to the point *Someone* else – to trust in. And so that person is more likely to look to the Lord to see him through whatever may come. It doesn't always work that way, remember we're talking about *likelihoods* here; but certainly we see it in the two poor widows before us this morning.

And from them we learn several things; first, that God loves a *humble* giver. Imagine being the poor widow in today's Gospel lesson. You're standing there in line waiting to put your two measly coins in the collection box. Wealthier folks in front of you are dumping in heavy handfuls of large coins. When they land in the box it sounds like a slot machine paying out a jackpot. Onlookers nod approvingly at their generosity. Now it's your turn. The two tiny *tinks* of your coins can barely be heard ... oh, but they're loud enough to make people look away covering their faces to conceal their smirks. They're thinking, "Does she really think that her wretched little offering makes the tiniest bit of difference? How foolish!" And the irony is that the joke, if there is one, is on them. For them the collection box is a chance to show off, a way to impress others with the level of their devotion—just like the having the best seats in the synagogue and offering the long prayers that Jesus mentions earlier in the reading. It's all about proving to others what pious people they are. It's, "See? Look at me and how godly I am." This woman, by contrast, isn't putting on a show for anyone; not for other people, and not for the Lord. She doesn't begin to imagine that her offering says anything about her either good or bad – which is the point: she's not thinking of herself at all. That's what humility is all about. And while she certainly knows that her offering won't help the Lord's work much, still, it's all she has to help with. So she gives what she has.

And that illumines another feature of giving that the Lord loves, which is *compassionate* giving. This is seen in the widow of Zarephath in today's Old Testament lesson. You may remember that Elijah the prophet was a wanted man in Israel. He had gone up against King Ahab, who had married a pagan princess named Jezebel. She, in turn, introduced the worship of the Canaanite god Baal into the land. Through her pushing her religion and persecuting those faithful to the Lord, in very short order the worship of Baal almost completely supplanted that of the one true God. Anyway, since in Canaanite mythology, Baal was the god of the sky and responsible for sending rain, Elijah prayed to the Lord for the rain to stop until such time that the people returned to him. The goal was to show how powerless Baal really was. So that's what happened: no rain. The land dried up. The crops failed. The orchards and vineyards died. And no amount of prayer or sacrifice to Baal could bring an end to the drought. King Ahab blamed Elijah for it all – even though it was his own fault. But that's how Elijah came to be a wanted man.

After some time, the Lord sent Elijah out of the country, to the widow of Zarephath, to keep him out of Ahab's reach. I imagine that Elijah must have been a little disappointed when he got there and met her. He was probably thinking, "Lord, why couldn't you have sent me to a rich widow with whom I could hide out in comfort and style?" Instead, he finds this woman who is utterly destitute. She's gathering sticks to make a little fire over which to prepare the last bit of food she has in the house. It's to be one last meal for herself and her son. It's all they have. The drought and resulting crop failures had sent the cost of food skyrocketing. Even if she had some money, which she didn't, she probably wouldn't have been able to buy anything more to eat. And as it is, you can be sure that she'd been holding on to this last bit of food for some time, hoping against hope that something might change and that this one meal might be the bridge that holds them over to when food might be available again. It's only at the point when

she's given up, and she and her son are actually starving to death that she decides to use this food. In this context, then, Elijah comes along and says to her, "Give *me* some something to eat first." Amazing.

Now, it's true that Elijah made a promise to her about the food not running out if she were to take this leap of faith. And to some extent she believed him; but then, what other hope did she have? None. But there's something else going on here. She must also have doubted the prophet. He was after all a stranger, a foreigner; and here she was living in times when her own friends and neighbors would have done anything: lie, cheat, steal, maybe even kill for food. She had plenty of reasons *not* to believe what Elijah said to her. And so while faith did play a role in her agreeing to feed him also, I think compassion also played a key role. She who knew firsthand the pain of starvation was not going to leave someone else, even a stranger who might turn out to be a con man, without food while she had the means to do something about it. That's compassion – a word that literally means "to suffer with". And of course, that's the kind of compassion the Lord has for us. He makes our problems and our pain his own and gives himself – his own life on the cross – to relieve and save us. On a smaller scale, that's the kind of compassionate giving shown by this poor widow.

And this, in turn, reveals another aspect of giving that the Lord loves; namely, he loves to see *sacrificial* giving. Certainly both of the women in our readings display this. Even so, I'd like to go back to the first widow we talked about. Why? Because she had *two* coins. And unfortunately, because of the translation, we get the impression that her two coins together had the value of only one penny—which sure isn't much. But it's always hard to translate biblical money values because there isn't a one to one correspondence with today's money and the relative value of our goods. What we know is this: that her two coins together were worth 1/64th of the daily wage of a common laborer at the time. Depending on how you work that out, that means that in today's terms each coin she had was worth around two dollars, give or take a bit. It still isn't much; but in those days it would have been enough to buy several loaves of the flat bread they commonly ate. And rather than think of these coins as the last money she had in the world, a better way to understand it is that they represented her daily living allowance. She probably had a job of some kind – one that paid very poorly, maybe taking in laundry or something like that. Anyway, after the rent and all her other necessary expenses, this was what she had to spend on food for the day. And the point is this: she had *two* coins. She could have made an offering at the Temple with one – a very generous offering considering it would have been half of what she had available – and still have had enough to buy something to eat. Instead, she chose to give it *all* for the Lord's work while she herself went hungry that day. She put this opportunity to contribute to the Lord's work above her own physical needs and comfort, and in this way she showed to a lesser degree the same sense of *sacrificial* giving that Jesus displayed in giving himself on the cross. To say it another way, she through her giving *lived* sacrificially for the Lord who would *die* sacrificially to take away her sin.

And again, I'd stress that for her it was not an "I have to" sort of thing; it was an "I get to". It was something she wanted to do joyfully as a means of expressing her gratitude, as a means of participating in the work of God, and finally, as a means of exercising her faith. This is the last aspect of stewardship I want to talk about – the truth that God loves a *faithful* giver.

Again, both of these poor widows show this kind of giving; but for the widow of Zarephath, it was something of a gamble – a gamble she could afford to take because she had nothing to lose. She knew she was going to die. The prophet came along gave her hope for life, which, even if he turned out to be a liar and a cheat, wasn't going to make her situation much worse than it was already. So I'd like to focus on the other widow because her situation

more closely resembles our own. She was literally living hand to mouth. Each day she earned enough to live one more day; and yet on this day she gave it all for the Lord's work. She could do that because she wasn't trusting in what she earned, else she would have kept some of it for a rainy day. She didn't need to do that because she trusted that tomorrow the Lord was going to take care of her. She had taken to heart the words of Jesus that said, "Don't worry about tomorrow asking, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." So she could give in faith without knowing what was coming because come what may, she was certain that her future was safe in the Lord's hands.

It's interesting that her story is left hanging. With the widow of Zarephath we're told what happened. Each day there was enough food for that day too – but nothing more. You might be left wondering what happened to the widow in today's Gospel reading. How does her story turn out? Let me suggest this: if you don't already know the answer, you still don't get it. And you've got some serious troubles with money.

The Lord our God is by nature a giver. That's what he does. He gave us life. He gave us our bodies, souls, minds, senses, and reason. He gave us this world and all that is in it to enjoy. On account of our sin, he gave his Son to die for us. Now by his Word and Spirit he gathers us together and gives us his forgiveness, righteousness, and eternal life. He gives us each other for mutual support, encouragement, and consolation. And he gives us opportunities to give as he does. May he then fill us with the grace of giving that we may do so humbly, compassionately, sacrificially, and faithfully as he does, and so show ourselves to be his true sons and daughters with no troubles whatsoever with money. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!