

The Power of a Penny

2 Corinthians 8:1-9; Mark 12:41-44

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Church, Portland, Indiana on November 8, 2015]

I

There was a man who called the church and asked the secretary if he could speak to the Head Hog at the trough.

The secretary said, “Who?”

The man repeated himself: “I’d like to speak with the Head Hog at the Trough.”

The secretary pulled herself together and said,

“Sir, if you mean our pastor you will have to treat him with a little more respect and ask for the ‘Reverend’ or ‘The Pastor.’ But certainly you cannot refer to him as the Head Hog at the Trough.”

The man said, “I understand. I was calling because I want to donate \$50,000 to the church building fund.”

She said, “Hold on, Sir— the Big Pig just walked in.”

II

We are in the midst of the stewardship season, when church members throughout the land—

including here at First Presbyterian Church Portland—

are being challenged and encouraged to pledge their financial support to the ministry of Christ’s church for the year 2016.

So today my task is daunting, yet clear:

to preach such a profound and powerful stewardship sermon that you will be deeply moved and motivated...

to dig deep,

to increase your pledge,

even to tithe of your income,

so that hopefully we can balance the church's budget next year

(or at least reduce the deficit),

and continue to expand our ministry into the community

But have you ever thought how ironic it is to have a preacher speak to the church about money?

Preachers are the least acquainted with wealth and riches of any profession we know of.

Asking the preacher to talk about money is like asking Donald Trump to give a TED talk on humility.

In a book entitled Plain Talk about Churches and Money, the author states:

Clergy often come to their calling with a distinct aversion to conflict and to having to deal with money issues. Our culture seems to reinforce them in that behavior. So long as clergy are cowed and anxious in the face of money and wealth, they will remain silent about the spiritual issue that touches our culture more deeply than any other...

A money-driven culture seems to want clergy who are "safe" and "tame" when dealing with the spiritual dimension of money.

When it comes to money, we prefer to hear from bankers, CPA's, and financial planners—

people who actually know something about money.

We take money seriously and we rarely talk about it in public or with honesty.

We keep our money conversations to a minimum and a mumble.

However, Jesus, talks loudly and frequently about money.

He says so much about money that the “money people” get nervous.

(In case you are wondering, that is us.)

We get nervous when we hear preachers preaching about money because we forget that money is just **stuff**...

stuff that comes and goes like the wind.

Yes, it is important stuff and it is essential stuff...

but it is not more important than people or faith,
and it is certainly not more important than God.

Jesus speaks more about money than just about anything else.

Many of his parables are about money—

the parable of the talents,
the parable of the unjust steward,
the parable of the man who tore down his barns to build bigger barns,
being three notable examples.

It is ironic that Jesus,
who was hardly rich by the standards of his day or ours,
would have so much to say about money.

So if we are willing to talk about God,
we should be willing to talk about money,
because Jesus certainly was.

III

In the Gospel reading today Jesus gives his disciples a lesson on stewardship.

He does so by speaking frankly about money.

One day Jesus and his disciples find themselves across from the Temple treasury in Jerusalem.

They watch as all the rich “movers and shakers” drop wads of cash into the treasury.

But then a poor widow walks by.

We are not told how Jesus knew she was poor,
but after watching all those rich folks,
it was probably obvious.

Jesus and the disciples watch as she steps to the treasury,
reaches into her purse, and pulls out what is left of her riches...
two measly coins worth about a penny.

She doesn't hesitate,
but drops them in,
then moves on.

Well, when Jesus sees a teachable moment, he jumps on it.

He says to his disciples,

“The truth is that this poor widow gave more to the collection than all the others put together. All the others gave what they'll never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn't afford—she gave her all.” (The Message)

The tendency is to turn this story into a sweet and sappy moment:

“Look what she has done, given away her last penny...”

What a poor, sweet woman she is."

And then, knowing that we are not quite as poor nor quite as sweet,
and feeling a little guilty about that,
we might increase our pledge by a dollar or two.

And then we go home thinking we have learned something about stewardship.

IV

Well, let me spoil our little self-congratulatory pity-party for this poor widow.

If we think that it is out of sweetness or weakness or meekness that this woman has given away everything she has, we are wrong.

Rather, her sacrifice comes out of her strength.

What appears to be weakness is in fact a powerful witness.

Because of her faith, she gives from a position of courage and strength.

The stewardship lesson we need to learn is this:

to give so generously is to act from a position of strength.

It must be nice to act from such a position of strength.

I think of Chad, who was my mechanic for many years.

Chad is such a good mechanic that he bought my old Volkswagen Passat, the car I bought new in 2001, my pride and joy, and drove 272,000 miles on one clutch.

Chad worked on the car for years, so he knew what he was getting!

Chad would look under the hood of my car and tell me,
as he did on one occasion,

that the battery was shot and needed to be replaced.

Well, who was I to argue with him?

So I said to Chad, “Well, that’s what I thought. And, darn it, I was going to replace the battery myself, but I have to get to a funeral, so you better do it.”

Chad spoke from a position of strength.

Or think about going to your doctor.

Your doctor tells you your cholesterol is too high,
 and you need to exercise more,
 eat less fatty food,
 and start taking a little pink pill at bedtime.

Now that’s a position of strength.

People in the know,
 like your mechanic and your doctor,
 are people that matter.

They sound good...
 they do good...
 many of them are in uniform,
 so they look pretty good too.

It is a great position to be in,
 to operate from a position of strength.

V

The poor widow acted out of her strength,
 not weakness,
 when she dropped her two coins into the temple treasury.

She gave the most that she could give.

She gave generously and she gave boldly.

Can we say that we act out of strength when it comes to our faith?

Or do we fit the description of Jesuit theologian John Haughey who wrote:

“We read the Gospel as if we had no money, and we spend our money as if we know nothing of the Gospel.” (*The Living Pulpit*, April–June 2003, p. 14).

Listen: There is nobody here who doesn’t have the fortitude and the faith to live boldly and generously.

We have at least as much strength as the poor widow.

Unfortunately, the Gospel we profess to believe has been so watered down that most of us operate from a position of weakness when it comes to our religion.

If it isn’t the media saying our religion is irrelevant,
 then it is the self-righteous “finger-pointers”
 saying that we aren’t good enough Christians—
 we don’t pray enough,
 we don’t know the Bible well enough,
 we don’t believe the right things,
 we aren’t faithful enough.

Well, folks, both sides are testing the mettle of your faith.

Don’t let them find it a gooey mass of doubt.

Rather, let them know that your faith is a mighty fortress... a strong tower.

Show them that you believe and you act from a position of strength.

Be like the poor widow—drop those coins in the basket as if you are delivering the keys of the kingdom with firmness and conviction.

As theologian Emilie Townes writes,

“Those coins represent more than money. They represent faith and belief and how these must be lived out in our lives in concrete acts.”

Even a penny has the power to make a huge difference when given with sacrificial generosity.

VI

We see an example of this kind of sacrificial generosity in our epistle reading from 2nd Corinthians 8.

Macedonia in Paul’s time was a fairly prosperous region.

A major trade route ran through the middle of the region, linking many Roman colonies, and bringing economic prosperity.

But the churches in Macedonia did not share in this prosperity.

Yet Paul writes to the church in Corinth about the extraordinary generosity of these poor, impoverished Macedonian Christians.

The Corinthian Christians had been taking up a collection to help the beleaguered church in Jerusalem for about a year,
but they were behind on their pledge.

(“Behind on their pledge”—sounds familiar to some of us, doesn’t it?)

Now this is certainly a bit of a sales pitch from Paul,

but listen carefully to how he frames the issue:

“We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints — and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us.” (2 Cor. 8:1-5, NRSV)

Notice how Paul ties this overflowing generosity to God’s grace.

Despite their afflictions,
 despite their poverty,
 the Christians of Macedonia joyfully gave out of their strength...
 not because they were well-off (they weren’t)
 but because they had given themselves “first to the Lord.”

Think about this for a moment.

If any people had a right to think “we are weak...we can’t afford to give,”
 it was the Macedonian Christians.

Yet they gave according to their means,
 and, says Paul, even beyond their means.

Like the poor widow, “they gave themselves first to the Lord.”

What might it mean for you and me—giving ourselves first to the Lord?

Well, one immediate result would be for us to acknowledge and really embrace in our hearts the opening words from Psalm 24:

*The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it.*

Everything and everyone belongs to God.

When we give ourselves over to God and allow our wills to be aligned with God's will, we also trust that there is sure provision for us out of God's abundance.

We can move through life,
not with an assumption of scarcity and weakness,
which is rooted in fear,
but, like the poor widow and the Christians of Macedonia,
with a certainty of abundance,
which is rooted in strength,
and leads to joyful giving.

VII

Of course, the ultimate model for appearing weak but acting from a position of strength is Jesus Christ himself.

Jesus lifted up those qualities of life that the world usually considers weak—
gentleness,
compassion,
mercy,
tolerance,
forgiveness,
redemption.

But he made them the most important virtues of life.

Jesus gave voice to the poor and the outcast.

He gathered up all the crummy, rotten, seemingly worthless people and said,

God does not forget these people, and neither should you. Act from your strength and take care of them, and they will become your strength.

Like the poor widow dropping in the two pennies,
what seems small and insignificant is really quite powerful.

Money, by its very nature, is a symbol of strength.

Everyone knows the Golden Rule—**the one with the gold rules.**

And everyone knows that those who have money also have power.

“Follow the money,” is what Watergate reporters Woodward and Bernstein were told, and when we do follow the money, we know where it leads—
to power:

economic power,
political power,
business power.

Those who do not have money do not have power.

But in the church Jesus offers us a paradigm shift that says those who have the money need to be acting from that position of strength.

Money in our pockets is worthless.

Money used to serve God has great power to carry on God’s work.

VIII

The story is told of a very wealthy man who had never been known for his generosity to the church.

The church was involved in a big financial campaign and two members of the campaign committee paid the wealthy man a visit.

In view of his considerable resources, they were hopeful that he would want to make a significant gift to the campaign.

“So,” the man of wealth said, “you’ve come here to ask me to make a gift to the church’s campaign. Did you know that I have a widowed mother who has no other means of support but me?”

No, they said, they did not know that.

“Did you know that I have a sister who was left alone with five children by her alcoholic husband and no means to provide for them?”

“No,” they said, “we did not know that either.”

“Well, did you know I also have a brother who is in a wheel chair because of an automobile accident and can never work another day to support his wife and family?”

Feeling embarrassed, the men said, “No, sir, we did not know that either.”

“Well,” the wealthy man thundered, “I’ve never given a dime to any of them, so why should I give anything to you?”

IX

So...on the one hand we have the poor widow who gives everything she has.

On the other hand we have a wealthy man who won’t give peanuts,
even to his relatives.

Somewhere in-between is where all of us fall.

As we each consider our response to God’s call to be good stewards of the resources God has entrusted to us,

we need to ask ourselves:

Do we give from our strength or from our weakness?

Our strength is our desire to more and more make this world the kingdom of God.

Our weakness is our desire to more and more make this world our personal treasury.

Friends, in recent years you have acted from strength—
you have increased your level of giving the last two years,
and doing so has made it possible for me to serve as your pastor.

I thank you for all that you have done and are doing.

But now, more than ever, your church needs you to act from your strength.

As Eric Rogers outlined in his stewardship letter to the congregation, with the demands on the Foundation for funding the roof project and supporting the budget of the church, the support of each and every member is needed now more than ever.

Today I invite you, as you consider your pledge for 2016,
to give to your church boldly and with great conviction and confidence,
because your penny has the power to make an enormous difference
in our church,
in our community,
and in the world.

Like the Christians of Macedonia,
give yourself first to the Lord,
then give out of your strength as a steward of God's amazing grace.

Amen.

Sources:

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