

Oct. 17, 2004
Genesis 32:22-31; Luke 21:1-4
First Parish Church
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Promises

When my grandmother was at the young age of 52, she became a widow. She was left with 2 grown children, a 10-year-old, and an adult woman, who we as Aunt Millie. She had been my grandfather's nanny and had never left my grandfather's childhood home. A couple of months before my grandfather died, his mother died, and my grandparents moved into his family home and inherited Aunt Millie, as well.

Suddenly, my grandmother had to shoulder many responsibilities, not the least of which was to learn about money. My grandfather had always taken care of all that. She had never balanced a checkbook, didn't really understand my grandfather's small businesses, and what was she to do with Aunt Millie, who was still being paid as a housekeeper. It was overwhelming for my grandmother. Thankfully, extended family helped her over the years until she could begin to handle more of the money matters herself. One of the real ironies for me in all this is that my grandmother eventually became the treasurer for her church.

Unlike the widow in today's gospel, my grandmother was not poor. She was not cash rich, but she had more land than even she realized at first. Like today's widow, my grandmother was a generous, even sacrificial, giver in her financial gifts to her church and her community and to Aunt Millie, who she continued to pay for the rest of Millie's life, even when my grandmother had to become her caregiver at the end of her life.

Jesus often lifted up widows as people from whom we could learn much. Maybe it was partly because in biblical times widows were often among the most vulnerable of the society. Maybe their very vulnerability led them to trust in the grace and promises of God.

In today's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, we encounter someone else at a very vulnerable time in his life – Jacob. As you may remember, years ago Jacob had conned his father into blessing him with the special blessing that was intended to be Esau's. In the spiritual sensibilities of the day, such a blessing could not be withdrawn; it had a life and spirit all its own. As Esau plotted Jacob's death, Jacob fled, with just the clothes on his back, to Haran, to his mother's brother's home. In the intervening years, Jacob has accumulated wives, concubines, children and flocks and herds and droves of animals. Now he is heading home with his entire household.

Will Esau forgive him? Or will Esau come and kill them all? Jacob sends 'bribe' or 'peace' offerings (depends on how you look at it) on ahead to appease his brother. He sends goats, sheep, camels, cows, and donkeys. He sends them in droves, spaced in such a way that Esau will experience them as waves of presents.

It is the night before their reunion. Jacob spends the night alone by the water of the Jabbok. It is a night of wrestling for Jacob, a night of reckoning –of reckoning with all that has gone before and what lies ahead.

The light of the day draws to a close. All the activities of managing a household settle down. The preoccupations of the day can no longer hold at bay the wrestlings of the heart.

We know of such restless and wrestling nights

- struggling, like Jacob, with the broken and strained relationships within our families,
- worried about our own or a loved one's physical, emotional, or spiritual well-being
- pained over the unethical dynamics in our workplace, wondering if we should look for different work
- stressing over our finances

How will we pay the bills? How will we pay the medical bills for a chronically ill loved one? Can we afford to do the upgrades on the house? Should we buy another car? Do we need more insurance? Should we loan or give money to our adult children, who are struggling more than we are? What can we afford for college?

This last question is one that our family has wrestled with in the past year. One of the interesting things to me in exploring this question had to do with the financial aid forms we filled out. I noticed that there was no place on any of the forms I filled out to report financial commitments to churches/synagogues/mosques and other nonprofit organizations. The implication seems to be that these are simply discretionary expenditures and not real commitments.

So, I contacted one of the Directors of Financial Aid at one of the colleges, who told me that I could report such information in an attached letter and it would be taken into consideration. To her credit, I think it was. However, I wonder how many families would guess they could do such a thing? And what does it say that it's not on the form in the first place.

(hold up a twenty-dollar bill)

We call this money. It's an odd thing. It can be a fun thing or a stressful thing. And with the increasingly complex and diverse ways we handle money it can be a confusing thing for all of us, especially children. I remember one time when my children were young and one of them said to me, "We need to get _____." I don't remember exactly what it was, but you can fill in the blank. I told her that we didn't have the money right now, to which she responded innocently, but also incredulously, "Well, just use the card." What a great observation on her part! To her money meant coins and bills. However, she had seen me use 'a card' in exchange for things we wanted or needed. I explained to her that the card I used was a debit card, which functioned as a promise that there was 'money' in the bank to pay for the purchase. And the fact was that there wasn't any money in the bank right then for what she felt we needed.

This money we say is worth twenty dollars. However, this actual piece of paper is not really worth much. The paper itself is only worth a few cents I think. Yet it is a promise. We could say that this is a promissory note.

It is a promise that I am willing to exchange so much of my time at work, a portion of my talents, a percentage of my financial resources, for so many hours of your time in sharing your talents. This is the exchange of goods and services we call bartering.

Yet, sometimes, this promissory note is a promise I simply give, in gratitude for the gracious gift of life itself. It is a sign of my promise to trust in God's grace, and to be an agent, an angel (which means messenger) of God's grace.

Stewardship is our promise to live fully as children of God, in our bartering and in our gift giving. Stewardship is being the ward of all that we are and all for which we are

responsible – our time, our talents, and our treasures.

Decisions about our time, our talents and our treasures can all keep us at night. Families with children still at home increasingly find themselves having to make stewardship decisions about time. People who have become unemployed have to wrestle with whether they should take any job to pay the bills or keep searching for one that uses their gifts more appropriately. There is no easy answer to that struggle.

On a regular basis, I suspect most of us find ourselves wrestling with that symbol of our financial treasures, our checkbooks.

Wrestling because

-sometimes there is so little there we wonder how we will make it

-sometimes there is a little more there than before and we wonder what possibilities this opens up

-and sometimes there is so much there we find ourselves called deeper and deeper into the possibilities of gift giving.

When we look at our checkbooks, there are many stewardship questions that come to us.

-Did we garner these resources through faithful stewardship of our time and talents?

-What percentage of the whole does each category of expenditure represent?

-Specifically what percentage of the whole is our giving to the church and other charitable organizations, and does this percentage represent the promises we want to make?

-In other words, do our financial promises reflect our priorities?

One of the remarkable things about the widow in today's gospel is how proportionately large her gift was in relationship to her resources. The Hebrew teaching was to tithe, to give 10%. Probably many of those who brought gifts to the treasury that day were bringing a tithe.

However, the widow's gift is so over the top, so extravagant, it is hard to imagine.

When you make a financial gift to the church, some of it is used in such a way that you receive direct benefits – through worship services and the facility for such services, Christian education, the ministry of music, pastoral visits, and a context to collaborate with others on mission.

And some of the gifts we give to the church are just that- pure gift.

I must admit I don't often look at a facility as gift, but indeed it is. We are able to provide space for groups like:

-A & Alanon , Boy Scouts

-a high school music group I discovered using the vestry on Thursday,

-community preschool,

-community concerts

-and I'm still learning all the others.

Although it is frustrating at times, it's a sign of vitality and service that we keep running out of space in which for groups to meet.

What a great problem to have! I also find it interesting that many community people, who are not part of the church, have expressed gratitude to Larry in this last year that we decided to stay here in this physical location. They experience the restoration as a promise from us that we are committed to being a place of worship and a place of service in the midst of this community. We promise to be here.

Our gifts to the church also have made it possible for us to collaborate with other churches over the years to provide services to those in particular need, such as the Tedford Shelter and Mid Coast Hunger Prevention.

When I was first learning about this congregation from people outside the congregation, they shared with me their deep appreciation at how this church has been a strong witness for outreach in this community.

Our gifts continue to move in ever widening circles through our covenant with our denomination, the United Church of Christ. Our gifts make possible a witness in Maine, in the United States, and throughout the world. Our gifts make possible financial relief for those in immediate crises, such as after the hurricanes in Florida. Our gifts make it possible to have advocates who speak out on matters of ethics and justice. Our gifts help us to be a light to the world – growing, connecting and serving- as we walk in the way of the one, who is the Light of the World.