

Date: October 26, 2003

SUNDAY: Ordinary 30–Consecration Sunday

SERMON: Faith in a Penny and a Handful of Flour

Text(s): 1 Kings 17:1-16; Mark 12:38-44

© 2003 L. R. Kalajainen

These past few weeks, several members of our congregation have shared with you their personal witness of what this church means to them and why they give to support it. I very much appreciated their remarks, and it always warms my heart to hear people say why they are personally invested in the church. But I'm also aware, especially on the Sunday when it's my turn to preach on this subject, that speaking about stewardship, particularly the stewardship of money, can sometimes be dangerous.

There was a very wealthy man who was asked if he would share his own testimony about why he believed in stewardship. He agreed, and when he stood up in front of the congregation, he said, "You all know me as a man of great wealth. And it's true. I'm a millionaire. But I want to say that I attribute it all to God's blessings. I remember as a young boy, I had just earned my first dollar for feeding my neighbors' dog while they were on vacation. I went to church and there was a missionary speaking. He challenged us to give sacrificially to the work of missions, and since I only had one dollar, I knew that I either had to give all of it to God or none of it. So at that moment, I made a decision. I decided to give my whole dollar, the first money I'd ever earned to God. I believe God blessed that decision, and that is why I'm a millionaire today."

He made his way back to his seat, and there was a sort of awed silence at his testimony. But just as he was sitting down, a little old lady sitting in the same pew, leaned over toward him, and in a loud stage whisper that could be heard all around said, "I dare you to do it again."

If there's a point to that story, it's that it's probably a lot easier to give away all you that have when you have only a dollar, than it is to give away a billion when you have several billions

more still in the bank. Money and possessions have a way of growing on us, literally, so that we end up less free in many respects than we were when we had less. You may remember a few years ago, when Ted Turner, decided to publicly congratulate himself for pledging to give (under certain conditions) a billion-dollar contribution to the United Nations. In the interviews he gave, he spoke of what a tough decision it was for him, how he was breathing heavily and his pulse was racing because it seemed like such a huge risky thing he was doing. And I suppose it did feel risky. Our relationship to things, and particularly money, is very complicated. And it doesn't matter whether we have very little or very much; money or what it represents— power, security, control— are the things that drive our behavior.

But if it feels risky to think of giving away what we've worked hard to accumulate, it's probably also one of the most essential things we need to do. Otherwise, why would there be so much that is said about this theme in the Bible. There is a multitude of specific religious laws governing wealth and giving in the Torah, there are numerous warnings against the idolatry of wealth in the prophets, and there are stories like the ones we heard this morning in the Old Testament. The Gospel writers included more sayings of Jesus on the subject of money than on any other, and St. Paul wrote extensively on this matter of giving also. You may feel as though you've heard more about money during this stewardship campaign than you ever wanted to, but if we don't think often and deeply about our relationship to our possessions from the perspective of our faith, not only would we be unfaithful to the biblical witness to something so central to our lives, but we would allow the world to form our attitudes and opinions by default.

How do we escape being possessed by our possessions? How do we free ourselves from the groundless fear that if we give generously, we're doing something very risky? Our lessons this morning offer us a perspective on that dilemma. Both are stories of poor widows. In the world out of which these stories came,

widows occupied about the same place in society that illegal immigrants do in ours— that is to say, an unprotected place. The place of women in general was defined by their relationship to a particular man. If they had no husband, or if widows, no grown children to be their social security system in their old age, then they were often destitute, and no one would provide for them. This is the case with the widow of Zarephath to whom the prophet Elijah is sent. Picture her dilemma.

Here she is, a Gentile woman living in what is now Lebanon. She's a long way from the center of the Israelite kingdom in Samaria. She's not even Jewish. What does she know or care about the political and religious struggles going on between King Ahab of Israel and Elijah, the prophet of Israel's God. When your whole day is focused on finding enough food to stay alive, you don't have much time or energy for anything else. She has been squatting on a piece of land and eking out a subsistence living for herself and her son. But now the drought has put an end to that. Her meager supply of wheat is just about gone, there will be no harvest to replenish it, and when it's gone, she and her son will have no further means of sustenance. What are her options? She has no options, none that she can see anyway. Her fatalism is the normal response of the poor to their lot. She will just live day by day until the flour runs out and the oil runs out and then she and her son will probably forage for awhile, but with the drought, even the foraging will not keep them alive and then, eventually, they'll starve to death and that will be that. End of story

It's a depressingly common story, isn't it? Thanks to the miracle of TV news, we can watch her story re-enacted in many parts of the world virtually every day. Lucky us. But now an unexpected event overtakes this poor widow. Out of the desert appears this shaggy-haired apparition who accosts her and asks her for something to drink. She undoubtedly recognizes him as some kind of holy man. Who else would

look like that and come walking out of the desert, probably smelling like a goat? In the East, the tradition of unlimited hospitality to guests is very strong, even today. She doesn't even question who this strange man is; he's appealed to her as a guest, she must play the part of the host. So off she goes to get him some water.

But as she turns away, Elijah calls after her and says, "Oh, and while you're at it, could you bring me a morsel of bread to eat."

The widow turns at this and says, "I'm sorry, I don't have any bread. All I have is one handful of flour and a tiny bit of oil, and I was just gathering firewood so I could go home and bake a round of pita bread for my son and I to have one last meal. And then it's over for us."

Elijah's reply appears to be callous and hard-hearted. How can a guest ask his host to take the last morsel of bread out of her own son's mouth and give it to him? But Elijah knows something she doesn't. He knows the God who is the Source of life itself, and whose resources never run dry. So he tells her. *"Don't be afraid. Go and do as you have said, bake that pita bread, but then come back here and bring me a piece of it first, and then you and your son have the rest. For thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, the jar of flour will not be emptied nor the jug of oil run dry until the day the Lord sends rain upon the earth again."*

Decision time. On what, or whom, will this poor widow dare to stake her life? On what or whom does she ultimately depend? That's the real theological heart of stewardship, isn't it? Isn't stewardship really about what or whom we trust for our very life? Sooner or later, that decision confronts us all. Whether we confront it as dramatically as this poor widow, or whether we drift into that decision more-or-less unthinkingly (and I suspect that for most of us, that's more common), all of us have a vision of ultimate reality upon which we base our lives and upon which we make decisions.

Whatever level of understanding this poor

widow had of the implications of her decision, and I imagine that her motives were at least as mixed up and complex as our motives usually are, she puts her commitment to the welfare of her guest ahead of her own needs, and in the process, places her trust, not in her possessions, or the lack of them, but in the word of God as it comes through Elijah. And she discovers, probably to her great surprise, that this God of Elijah is a God who keeps his word. She and her son and Elijah are sustained throughout the rest of that drought. The flour never runs out and the oil never runs dry.

In our gospel lesson, we meet another poor widow. This one has just attended services in the Temple in Jerusalem, and she's putting money in the offering at the public depository outside the door. Many wealthy people are ostentatiously dropping large sums into the offering. They weren't New England Yankees schooled in the tradition of discreet charity. Other cultures place a high value on the public display of charity. When we lived in Southeast Asia, hardly a day went by without a picture of a wealthy businessman handing a check to the head of some charitable cause on the front page of the newspaper. The notion of a rich benefactor publicly making a donation as an inspiration to others was a deeply-rooted cultural notion. We have a somewhat more muted tradition when we print the names of donors on the back of the symphony program, recognizing them as Benefactors or Patrons or Sustaining Donors. I've always been glad Jesus didn't say that what these big donors gave was worthless or unacceptable. Their large gifts were needed and useful. I'm glad Ted Turner and Bill Gates are discovering the joys of philanthropy; a lot of good things wouldn't get done otherwise. But useful as these large donations were, comparatively, Jesus said, the penny contributed by this widow was of more value than all the large sums contributed by the rich. It's not the size of her gift which is at issue here. Rather, it's what that gift

represents that is the issue. It's "*all that she had, her whole living.*" Jesus' way of doing accounting would never have earned him an MBA from Harvard Business School, but it is profoundly in line with the deepest realities of life. She knew that her ultimate security did not lie in grasping or hoarding wealth, but in an open-hearted and open-handed trust in the God who "owns the cattle on a thousand hills."

Generosity helps us remember that we are not self-made, none of us, whether we are paupers or billionaires. We are totally dependent upon God and upon other people for every breath we draw, every morsel of food we eat, every luxury we consume. We have to learn again and again what all of our possessions make it so easy for us to forget: we live always by grace, always in utter dependence and inter-dependence. Stewardship really has nothing at all to do with the size of our income or the rising and falling of our fortunes. It has nothing at all to do with what we think we can afford; it has everything to do with acknowledging our dependence upon God, and our interdependence with others.

On what or whom do you depend for your life? What will you give to acknowledge that dependence. Will your gift really represent your fundamental commitment to be a steward of God's gifts? Will it reflect your commitment to the ministries that God is calling us to undertake together here in Brunswick and in the larger world beyond? Will it express not merely your sense of what is your fair share or the least you can get by with, but instead, express your dreams and hopes for what God may do through us in the year ahead? Will the faith-promise you make today be only what you think you can afford, or will it be a bold declaration of trust in God, and a commitment to the future of our common ministry. I dare you to do it.