



Sermons from Poland Presbyterian Church

“Surplus and Substance”
Rev. Dr. David E. Gilbert
Luke 21:1-4
June 24, 2007

“As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” In our reading from Luke’s Gospel this morning we touch upon one important ramification of our baptism. Listen now to the word of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Luke 21:1-4 (pew Bible, NT page 65)

Prayer

Speak to us, O God, in a way that is so obvious, and so unmistakable, that it could only be your voice and your words to us. And then, in our hearing, help us to become the changed people that you want us to be. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

We have heard many times this story of our Lord in the Gospel of Luke. Let me read it again – this time as the King James version puts it:

And he looked up, and saw the rich men casting their gifts into the treasury. And he saw also a certain poor woman casting in thither two mites. And he said, “Of a truth I say unto you, that this poor widow hath cast in more than they all: for all these have of their abundance cast in unto the offerings of God; but she of her penury hath cast in all the living that she had.” (Luke 21:1-4)

Most of us have grown up with the story of the widow’s *mite*, and we know that it means a small denomination of ancient money, but as children we hear before we read or spell, and so as a child I thought that the story was about the widow’s *might* – *M-I-G-H-T* --- a modest but useful preaching point. Our Lord said, “*This*

poor widow has put in more than all of them; for they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all the living that she had.”

There are times, I think, and this may be one of them, when we wish that what we read in the Bible were less clear and more ambiguous. It would be helpful in this text, for example, to discover that there are several nuanced hidden levels of meaning whereby it does not say what we think it says. It was Mark Twain, --- more cynical than devout, ---who said, “It is not what I don’t understand in the Bible that troubles me, it is what I do understand.”

This is one of those texts: we get it.

Our dis-comfort with this text probably simply owes itself first to the fact that we are very much attached to our money and don’t wish to be persuaded to part with it, whether by Jesus or by anyone else. But secondly, this text troubles us because of its obvious conclusion that Jesus approves of those who give more than we think they can afford. We can only imagine that because of her recklessness this woman became a burden upon the welfare system of that time, became a burden upon the rich.

The rich, Jesus says here, give out of their abundance, --- that is, they give out of their surplus, their disposable income, which they can dispose of in charitable, benevolent, philanthropic ways; but the widow gave all that she had – gave out of her substance.. She gave all that she had, --- and, not content to simply describe the transaction, --- Jesus says that that is the better way: -- that she has given more than all of them.

By no means was my family wealthy -- neither were they poor. We were never at a loss as far as I can remember. My parents weren’t stingy with money; they gave us allowances; there were also special occasions when they might spend a little extra on us – say, on a birthday. But they taught us the value of money and the need to be careful with it.

-They taught us also another lesson about money: That we were to give to God first. Out of every allowance we were expected to set aside a certain amount as God’s amount....for that was their practice also. In my mother’s desk there was a little drawer for that. Before the bills were considered – the mortgage, heat, food, and clothing addressed – the church money was first set aside, taken out of the file, sealed up in envelopes to be given in church, and put in the drawer so that we would not be tempted to raid it for necessities as the month went along. Now my parents didn’t think of themselves as doing anything great or special – they simply thought they were doing –and teaching us kids --- what Christians are supposed to do as they understood the gospel.

I know a little Bethel AME church where it’s the custom to take the offering not as it is done here or in most churches, but by having the people proceed to the

communion table at the front of the church to present their monetary gifts before the stewards, who count the money as the gifts are brought down.

This is done during much singing and greeting; it's sort of a combination of the offering and the kiss of peace, if we had the kiss of peace here. You come down the center aisle, there's a table there, there's the stewards there, you're greeting them, they're greeting you, the church is filled with singing and joyous music; on your way back to your pew you greet people on their way up, and the stewards are doing a running tally. Then the music stops and they announce what the total is, saying, "We need fourteen dollars and forty-five cents, and we're going to do this again."

They do it again and again, calling everyone forward until the day's goal has been met – and no one can leave until it has been met or exceeded. Only then, when there is reason to do so, do they sing the doxology.

Now, I can imagine what you think of that kind of approach. That it smacks of manipulation, and coercion, and intimidation....and yes, it does....But as I said, when the goal is met, they sing they doxology, and they sing it with gusto! My how they sing! Heartily, enthusiastically, joyfully, -- in the thankfulness that God has been at work among them – prompting them, indeed leading them to give!

These are people who have next to nothing, poor people, giving out of their substance and not out of their surplus, -- giving that which is essential to them, -- people who have enough confidence in themselves, in their church, and in their God to place the material at the disposal of the spiritual, and it works.

Where do you place your ultimate trust? And how do you express that ultimate trust – your "faith"? That's the point in question here.

The woman who gave two coppers out of her poverty decided that she wasn't going to be defined by her poverty, -- or limited, --- but rather that by her total generosity she would be defined by her confidence in God's work and her total gratitude for God's grace. *(I think that's about as good a translation, as important an implication of what it means in today's secular, material-centered world to be "baptized in Christ," to "clothe yourselves with Christ" as there is -- don't you?.)*

She who had received all was going to give all. She is an example of the expression "Those who have suffered most have most reason to be both grateful and generous."

She didn't think in terms
of what she did not have,
or even of what she lost,
but of what she had.

Out of a gratitude disproportionate to all of her means
she gave it all to God,
thus attracting Jesus' attention and ours.

Few of us are poor as the widow, and I sincerely doubt that any of us would classify ourselves with the Bill Gates and William Buffets of this world – although among you there are probably many more rich than poor. Still, most of us see ourselves in neither category; we just try to get along, to do the right thing with as little impact upon our pleasures and our resources as possible. Ambrose Bierce said that a “Christian is somebody who lives a life of virtue insofar as it is not incompatible with a life of pleasure.”

I know many who say, “I will be charitable when I am rich.....or richer,” or “I cannot afford to act upon my more generous impulses.”

Recent college graduates are often asked to contribute to the annual College Fund.....or at least within a few years of graduation.

Many of these young people decline to give to their beloved alma-mater, saying that on a cost-benefit analysis of the situation they don't feel that they are yet in a position to pay a portion back to their college or university because they've already paid so much in to it – whether it be Harvard or YSU, Ohio State or Denison, or “that school” up in Ann Arbor.

“When I strike my pile, then I will consider giving something from it.” This story is meant to shame those kinds of stingy impulses, and to say that giving comes *not* out of surplus and convenience *but* out of substance and opportunity.

If you understand that life itself is a gift from God, if you understand that you are meant to express God's self-giving life in the world, and if you are confident and hopeful that God will sustain you in wealth and in poverty and in everything in between, then you will see life as giving and not as holding.

You remember what Churchill said, --- himself always worried about money and not famous for his charity? --- “We make a *living* by what we *save*, but we make a *life* by what we *give*.”

Now, I know that you know all of this and that there is not a new thought or a new syllable here; you have heard it all before. It's like that famous line from Micah 6: “*He has showed you, O man, what is good.*” God has already made clear what is expected of us. You know this. You know this.

What then am I driving at? Is it that everyone here should commit to a full tithe? Should we sit down and write out a new pledge or a new will, or both? Should we come forward as those people come forward in that little Bethel AME Church, so

that our contributions to the work of this church can be received and counted -- and if not up to the financial need -- then prevailed upon until they are?

No. But here's what I suggest. Think about the gospel. Think about the life that you have been given by God through his great mercy, and about what is most fearful to you, and what is most precious to you, and about those things in this world for which you are most grateful. Think about your fair share of your material responsibility in God's world, to this church, and to other agencies of good work.

Consider -- not just today or tomorrow, but as a part of your thinking throughout the summer --- your giving not in proportion to what you have but in proportion to what you have been given. Conduct a spiritual audit in the quiet moments over the coming weeks and days of summer.

If you do --- and then act on it --- I'll bet that you will find your life increasingly worth living, -- and your giving increasingly satisfying; -- and that is exactly what our Lord has in mind for you.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, in pointing to the poor widow who gave of her substance and not out of surplus you have given us a pattern. Help us to give not in proportion simply to what we have, but in proportion to what we have been given. Over these months of summer and help us to think anew about what our fair measure for giving is, and then give us the courage and the faith to follow through; for the sake of your kingdom in the world, in the church, in our lives. Amen.