



# Poland Presbyterian Church

*At the Green since 1802*

2 Poland Manor  
Poland, Ohio 44514  
330-757-1547

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**A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman**

## ***Running on Empty***

### **Mark 12:38-44**

*As he taught, he said, 'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, <sup>39</sup>and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! <sup>40</sup>They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.'*

*41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. <sup>42</sup>A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. <sup>43</sup>Then he called his disciples and said to them, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. <sup>44</sup>For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.'*

On Wednesday, an article appeared in the New York Times which began with these words: "Parents say they feel stressed, tired, rushed and short on quality time with their children, friends, partners or hobbies..." (*NY Times*: November 4, 2015)

"Stressed, tired, rushed and short on quality time..." There are days when we feel absolutely empty. We don't have another ounce of energy in us. It might be because we have worked hard physically, but more often than not, we are drained emotionally and spiritually. The causes: stress, conflict, misunderstandings, anxiety, work, demands, bills and financial obligations, etc. We feel as though we have been sapped of all our energy.... We are *running on empty*. Most of us know the experience of running on empty.

I believe that is why Jesus told the story of the Widow and the gift of two coins. She was the victim of a culture that oppressed women, and her gift was not something off the top... it was from the bottom. She was running on empty.

This morning, I want to explore the experience of "running on empty." First, I want to look at the oft' told story of the *Widow's Mite*. It has its implications for stewardship, but it is really about discipleship. Second, "running on empty" is not always a negative experience. Third, the church of Jesus Christ often runs on empty.

### I

The widow in the gospel story is one of many un-named heroines of the bible. We don't know anything about her except she was widowed. We don't know how old she was. We don't know how many children she had. We don't know her story. We only know that she was a widow and gave the last two coins she had to the temple treasury. But that gives us some idea of her circumstances.

Widows in biblical times were impoverished. They could not own property. They could not work. There was no social safety net to support them. If they were fortunate, a family member would take them in, or the brother of the deceased husband would marry them. Otherwise, they needed to scratch out an existence through begging, gleaning the fields, (Like Ruth and Naomi), or worse. A widow was economically vulnerable and was often exploited and abused by predators and by the system. Jesus introduced this encounter by referring to those who

"devour widow's houses." This was why the prophets continually preached about assisting the "widows and orphans." They were truly oppressed. They were always "running on empty."

Ironically, widows still had obligations to keep and one of those was the tax paid to the temple treasury. Jesus positioned himself to observe what people placed in the treasury. He observed that some gave a lot, because they could. Their donation did not change anything in their lives. They were still able to enjoy what they had. He contrasted that to the widow. She had little. When she gave, she had nothing. Empty. Why would Jesus point out this widow and the gift of two coins she made?

## II

*Running on empty.* It is not always negative. The long distance runner, who is in the last leg of a race, reaches deep down and taps her emptiness to finish the race. Some have talked about the feeling of euphoria that comes to runners and athletes who give all to their sport.

There is also wonderful, sacrificial, and loving dimension to it. Allow me to share the story of my father's clock with you. It currently hangs in our living room in Pennsylvania. It is a 16<sup>th</sup> century Dutch Farm Clock. My father brought it to this country following WWII. It hung in the hallway of our home in New Jersey and it was his pride and joy. I remember returning from college for Christmas of my Junior year and didn't see it. I inquired about it and was told that it was being repaired. It wasn't. Many years later I learned that there was not enough money to pay my tuition, and so my father surrendered the clock as collateral for a loan to pay for my education. Our family budget was literally *running on empty*. My education was a gift from my parent's relative poverty.

I understand, now, as a parent, the peculiar and solemn joy that comes from sacrificially giving for the sake of a child you love. Parents, mothers and fathers, often feel that they are running on empty, whether it is the sick child, lack of sleep, or just all the demands our society places upon parents. But, ironically, it is an emptiness that is filled with purpose and characterized by a solemn joy.

*Running on empty.* It is captured in some of the heartwarming stories of human love. O Henry's *The Gift of the Magi* tells the story of a couple who had between them \$1.87. Their coffers are empty. It was Christmas and they wanted to find some way to express their love for each other. The man had a watch. It was his most precious possession. He sold it to purchase combs for his wife's beautiful long hair. The wife sold her hair to purchase a chain for his watch. It is a sad, ironic tale... But it also celebrates the love that emanates, not from fullness, but emptiness. Who of us would not want to be loved like that?

Sacrificial love is a love that willingly runs on empty. It gives all. It surrenders that which is most precious. Who of us would not want to be loved like that? The good news is that we are. The love that God has for us; the love that is revealed in Jesus Christ, is a sacrificial love that literally empties itself for our behalf. In the words of Paul:

*(Christ) emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:7)*

Who of us would not want to be loved like that? We are. Our challenge: can we love in this same way? Can we humble and empty ourselves in service to the world?

## III

The church is an institution that often runs on empty. These days we hold up the mega churches as the successful congregations and indeed they do some remarkable things. But many congregations are running on empty, trying to figure out how to keep their doors open. Even medium congregations like ours experience the widow's emptiness. It takes more and more energy to keep everything going, and people are tired. It is harder to find the volunteers that we need to do the things we want to do. I don't think this is a horrible state of affairs. Why? Because discipleship is a call to run on empty.

Jesus called fishermen who were intimate with the experience of empty nets. He needed individuals who knew the experience of running on empty. Jesus, held up the love of a widow, who emptied her purse of the two copper coins in it, and challenged us to follow her example. Discipleship is about risking and emptying ourselves in the same way that Christ did.

- Can we empty ourselves, humble ourselves, even die to self in the pattern of Jesus?
- Can we bear Christ's image to the world and continue in his way of humble service?
- Is this congregation, Poland Presbyterian Church, a community of servant disciples that represents a humble, sacrificial Christ to the world?
- Are we a community that embodies hope in a hopeless world? When we declare that Christ is the hope of the world, we proclaim a hope that comes from risking emptiness. Will we risk that?

The NY Times article stated that we "feel stressed, tired, rushed and short on quality time with their children, friends, partners or hobbies..." This is probably not news to anyone...

But it is news is when:

- people who are tired...
- people who are stressed;
- people who are rushed and don't have enough time;
- people who are not sure if they will have enough...

It is news when these people give from this sense of emptiness...

- when they give to create understanding where there is enmity;
- when they give time, precious time to bring joy to others;
- when they give not from their abundance... but from this emptiness...

This is news... It happens here. It happens when people give in the spirit of the one they follow... Jesus Christ.  
It is Good News. Amen.