

ABUNDANCE AND POVERTY, RISK AND RESTORATION

First Congregational Church, Oshkosh, WI - Sunday, November 15, 2015

STEWARDSHIP SUNDAY Text: Mark 12:38-44

Natalie Angier recently wrote, *Hard as it may be to believe in these days of infectious greed and sabers unsheathed, scientists have discovered that the small, brave act of cooperating with another person, of choosing trust over cynicism, generosity over selfishness, makes the brain light up with quiet joy.*

When I was a mission pastor for the UCC in Hershey, PA fifty years ago, we had finalized our plans for the building and begun the week-long process with a capital funds campaign person from the national church to help us raise \$125,000 for the new church on West Chocolate Avenue. It was an exciting and challenging time in the life of that fragile congregation of 123 souls. The pledge day arrived on Sunday and our meeting place was nearly filled with parishioners and visiting dignitaries. At the appropriate time, persons who wished to make a pledge to Church of the Redeemer's future building were invited to come forward and present their pledge to one of the elders. I watched in utter amazement as a woman of advanced age came forward, dressed in her Sunday best (which was less impressive than that of Mrs. Rhea Reese of Reese Peanut Butter Cup fame), and dropped a card into the offering plate. I wondered, how did this wonderful, faithful person come to a decision to give more than she had already given toward the

operating budget of the church? I knew she was far from being a wealthy person. In fact, I knew she had been one of our recipients of Christmas dinner baskets for the two years I had served as pastor. I was concerned.

So, the next day I called on the elderly woman at her home which was located about 5 miles north of Hershey. Members picked her up each Sunday and drove her to church and home. She lived in an extremely small house. When one entered the front door and stood upon the uncovered broad board floor, the entire place was visible. She asked me to sit while she prepared coffee for us to drink. When she sat down, I said, “I have come to speak with you about your pledge to the building campaign Sarah. I believe you are by far too generous a person.”

She looked at me and tears welled in her eyes. “Pastor Seville,” she said, “the amount I pledged I have saved since I joined our church. I knew we would be building a sanctuary and educational building, and I wanted to contribute to give a contribution.”

Sarah said she had saved \$50 dollars over a two year period. Now, she pledged that amount toward our campaign. “Do not worry about me Pastor. That money is already here in my cookie jar,” She pointed to a well-used jar that stood on a shelf above the stove. “I have been waiting to give it toward our new building.”

I could hardly believe my ears. This woman who was living so close to the edge in those waning years of her life had somehow saved from her resources, meager as they were, \$50 for our building fund. As I said before, I could see everything she owned as we sat at her table. There was no television in her home. There was nothing new in her home. I could see her clothing on hooks by her bed for there were no closets in her home. A well outside supplied her water. Her toilet was an outhouse thirty yards or more behind her home. She did not own a car. She was widowed with no children. The rest of her family were deceased. She was living alone but was not alone for she had a sense of belonging to our church that she had not found for a long time.

I thanked her for the pledge. We prayed together for a successful completion of our building. As I left her home, I promised she would receive another Christmas basket in two months. She smiled and waved goodbye.

Truly I tell you, this poor widow had put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. 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.

Church of the Redeemer had a successful campaign. We raised more than \$125,000 in pledges that year, 1966, for our new building. We celebrated the next spring as we broke ground and the building started to go up before our eyes. We had a few people of abundance in that congregation. They were generous. Our church met its budget obligations and its additional building payments. We grew in membership by almost 100% by the time Fanny, the children, and I left for Lancaster, PA for my new call to serve at St. Andrews Church.

I have forgotten many things that took place in my first call after seminary there in Hershey, PA. But, I have never forgotten Sarah. She, like the widow Jesus and the disciples watched that day long ago in Jerusalem outside the temple, was a woman of deep, and abiding faith, unafraid to trust that God would care for her and her needs so that she could be generous toward others.

Recently I read about a homeless man in one of our large cities who was scavenging dumpsters behind fast food restaurants for food that was being discarded. He isn't doing this for himself, but for others living and sleeping on our streets. He gathers food daily, rides city buses with bags of what some consider garbage, and then walks the tough blocks and alleys distributing food to the homeless brothers and sisters he finds.

I have noted that this story has been shared on several national newscasts recently and in several magazines. The homeless man who is doing this can't remember when he actually began collecting and distributing the food. It's just that one day a journalist noticed him and asked some questions.

The generosity of poor people isn't so much rare as rarely noticed. That's the interesting thing about the Gospel text today. Why, out of the collection of sayings of Jesus that Mark had access to when he began to construct what I used to teach my New Testament Greek students at Lancaster Theological Seminary as the "running gospel – everything happening *immediately* (the words for *and immediately*: *και ευτηυσ*) served as transitional phrases from paragraph to paragraph without reference to time), - why, is this little story placed near the end of the gospel? Who really takes much time to note what the poor are doing among us? How they are faring? How they survive? Or, what role they play in giving some sense of cohesion to society?

In our nation it is a fact that poor people donate more, in percentage terms, than higher income groups do. Surveys of charitable giving continually prove this point. Their generosity declines less in hard times than the generosity of those who conceivable have more to share.

According to studies by Independent Sector, on average, the poorest fifth of our nation's population always give at more than their capacity; the next two-fifths at capacity; and the wealthiest fifth are usually capable of giving two to three times more than they currently do. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' survey of consumer expenditures, the poorest fifth of America's households contributed to charitable organizations at an average rate of 4.3% of their incomes. Compare that with the top fifth at less than half that rate, 2.1%.

Herbert Smith, a member of Rock Church in Washington, DC gives away 10% of his \$1,010 monthly disability check, and he states that (in an article in *McClatchy News*), "We're not scared of poverty the way some people are. We know how to get the lights back on when we can't pay the electric bill." The pastor of Rock Church, Coletta Jones, says, "When you have just a little, you're thankful for what you have, but with every step you take up the ladder of success, the money clouds your mind and gets you into a state of never being satisfied."

Tany Davis, a laid off security guard, had this insight: "As a rule people who have money don't know people in need...I believe that the more I give, the more I receive, and that God loves a cheerful giver. Plus, I've been in their position, and someday I might be again."

Is this why the writer of Mark's Gospel included this little vignette about the poor widow at the temple treasury? Did Jesus direct the attention of the disciples to that poor woman to raise awareness or simply illustrate a point? Did the writer feel this teaching was that significant to the welfare and mission of the early church that to ignore the story would be detrimental? But, I must confess, I am mystified as to why this story is present in this Gospel. It does nothing to show Jesus as having any special powers, or involved in any kind of miracle work. It does nothing to push the narrative forward to the great confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders of Jerusalem. It's just there.

Let's assume for a moment that the Gospel writer chose to include this paragraph to promote the social concerns of the early church. Jesus obviously was a rabbi who sought to include every person he encountered in the realm of God. No one was to be excluded on the basis of gender, status in life, prior walks in life... let's choose to see that the story is here to suggest to the followers of The Way in the first century that they too are to be in the world as Jesus was: open to all persons, period. Let's assume it is there in Mark's Gospel as a reminder to first century Christians that in God's realm are all conditions of persons. All are of value to that realm regardless of their status. If the community were open to all without distinction regarding class, gender, race, or any

other societal dividing line among them than that early church would model for all who were to follow.

This might be the point, you see. When a community of faith includes persons of all walks of life; and, when that community actually knows of situations of need and concern among its members, it becomes less possible to stereotype those who are different and living in more challenging circumstances – it becomes more difficult to justify oneself by writing persons off as worthy of less care from us because of their circumstance.

What a great story this is for us to focus on today as we bring our pledges for our 2016 operating budget at FCC forward and dedicate ourselves to do our best next year to see that our mission and ministries are underwritten. If it's true that love can do amazing things, then generosity is the way we make that love real: generosity with our time, our talents, our money, our hearts, our selves drives us deeper into a spiritual commitment to serve others as Jesus bids us. In The Old Testament scripture for today we find that generosity inspired Ruth to follow Naomi, to give her loyalty and love even when Naomi, out of worry for her future, was cranky and mean at times. Generosity inspired Boaz to make sure the two widows had more than enough grain to live on. Generosity inspired the other women in that little book that seems

pivotal to Old Testament narratives to rejoice at Naomi's blessing of a daughter-in-law who was more to her than seven sons. The depth of concern and care that Ruth and Naomi and Boaz (and the village around them) had for one another is the kind of concern and care that builds churches, communities, and a better world.

For the past four weeks members of our congregation have shared testimonies with us that have revealed their deep appreciation for First Congregational Church. In their words we have found that we have a great history, and we love to tell the story of all the wonderful things our forebears did long ago. This magnificent building, this wonderful sanctuary, are the physical reminders of those who came before us. They thought about us and provided a spiritual home for us, a church full of people with all kinds of stories and all kinds of gifts, sharing the same hope of being a blessing to the world. Yes, we are the heirs to a great legacy. And, like the unnamed widow at the temple treasury in Jesus' day or Ruth and Naomi several centuries earlier, we too are the ancestors to those who will come after us, one hundred years from now. So our act of standing up for FCC today will serve as a blessing to those who follow us on this very ground. You have been blessed by the generosity of all those who came before you, and today you reach out in programs like "Empty Bowls," the welcome kits for Christmas and refugees, the middle high anti-bullying scarf project, the senior high youth preparing

care packages for military veterans and many other services to our community and world in the name of Christ. You reach forward, to all those who will come after you, to your own spiritual heirs. As we stand up now we are holding in our hearts and minds people we may never meet but who will be blessed by our courageous generosity. Can you see it? All our futures inextricably entwined, like those of generations long passed, as God's realm is brought ever closer to being known here on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen.