

TO GIVE IT ALL

1 Kings 17:8-16

Mark 12:38-44

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TEXT: Mark 12:43-44 “Then Jesus called his disciples and said to them, ‘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.’”

PURPOSE: To invite us to claim a way of life in which our giving is a demonstration of our trust in God.

This time of year, over twenty-five years ago, back in Pennsylvania, a woman who was a member of my first congregation was hospitalized in the major medical center for that area. I still recall a visit I had with Helen late in the afternoon of the first Wednesday in November. That night, the consistory of the church, St. John’s United Church of Christ, would review the budget which a committee had prepared a few weeks earlier. St. John’s was, and is, a small church, and even back then, it was difficult for that church to afford to be a church.

Helen had been in the hospital since June. Over the course of her time there, our conversations had touched on many topics. I knew Helen before she’d gone to the hospital, but it was during those visits that I’d learned the full story of her life. Helen had grown up in the tiny town of McEwensville, where our church was located. She was the eldest child of the town drunk. Her young life was a miserable combination of too much responsibility and far too little love. As is the tragic case with so many children of alcoholics, she married a man with a drinking problem, a fellow that every called “Z”. Helen and Z moved south for quite a few years. When they returned to settle in Watsonstown, about three miles from her homeplace, Helen was nearly forty. It was then, in the late sixties, that she gave birth to her only child, a boy named Brian. Less than two years after Brian was born, Z dropped dead of a heart attack in their back yard. Now mother and son were left to struggle for a life together on their own.

When Brian was nine years old, he and his mother were crossing Main Street at one of Watsonstown’s two traffic lights when a drunk driver slammed into the boy’s young body. Brian nearly died. He spent months in the hospital, and Helen nearly lived there with him. He made extraordinary progress, but from his middle on down, his body remained permanently paralyzed, and he could only do a little with his left arm and hand. The crisis was more of a blow to Helen than it was to her paralyzed but mischievous and fun-loving son. The injustices which had become the daily bread of her life constantly rattled her strong convictions about right and wrong. She became quick to pick a fight, quick to judge, all but completely unforgiving, and deeply bitter.

I met Helen and Brian four years after the accident. They were not attending church at that time. But a year later, Brian joined my first confirmation class. Those six kids gave me a real run for my money. Brian did not do as well in the class as he could have, but every time I tried to discuss this with Helen, her protectiveness defended his mediocre performance to the hilt. Nevertheless, things did work out. On Sundays before worship at our church, a few strong men kept a watch for Helen's van and carried Brian up to our second floor sanctuary. We removed a pew to accommodate his wheelchair. So much for a fully accessible church building. Brian's confirmation was a triumph the whole congregation shared. When his classmates carried him up to the altar for the confirmation blessing, there wasn't a dry eye in the church.

That was on Pentecost, in the springtime. The troubles came that following winter. Both Helen and Brian were sick much of the time. Helen, who always put caring for Brian ahead of caring for herself, deteriorated steadily. Brian rebounded the following spring, but it was no help to Helen. When she finally went to the hospital in June, she was almost deliriously ill, and she had a black big toe on her right foot- the sign that diabetics fear more than anything. Two weeks after coming to the hospital, Helen's right foot was amputated below her knee. Her rehabilitation was a prolonged nightmarish ordeal, complicated by a gall that had to be removed, a severe depression, and her chronically rundown condition. While Helen was laid up in the hospital, Brian checked into a specialized hospital ninety miles away for corrective back surgery. The two of them who had been so wrapped up in each other, spent more than two months without seeing each other at all. Brian came home by Thanksgiving significantly improved, and far more independent physically than he had ever been. But new trouble came with the task of hiring someone to care for him. Helen couldn't bear the thought of someone other than her taking care of her son.

Why am I telling you about Helen and Brian? I need to return to the blustery November afternoon hospital visit. On this particular afternoon, Helen asked how things were going at the church. With that budget meeting coming up that evening, we got into a conversation about church finances. As she lay in that hospital bed, and I sat beside her, we talked about how difficult it was for our church to pay its bills. Almost abruptly interrupting the conversation, Helen called for her purse. I place on the bed beside her the large, compartmentalized semi-suitcase that served her as a mobile medical center and file cabinet. As I silently waited, Helen fished around until she found her checkbook. After "Pay to the order of," she wrote, "St. John's UCC."

After “the sum of,” she wrote, “fifty dollars.” “Here,” she thrust the check at me. “Take this to the meeting tonight. Let them know, before they start cutting that budget, that there are people in this congregation who really believe in the good our church can do.”

Helen’s gift was a gift from God. It completely melted my anxiety about our congregation’s finances. Her willingness to share what little she had was a living parable revealing God’s ability to call us to faithful generosity no matter what the circumstances of our lives.

Helen’s condition improved considerably during November and December. She left the hospital in time to celebrate Christmas at home. But life remained very difficult for her. A few years after I left that church, Helen died. Brian, who by then had graduated from High School, moved into one of the accessible apartments in Watsontown’s senior citizens’ high rise.

Whenever I hear the story of the widow putting her coins into the temple treasury, I cannot help but think of Helen writing that check from her hospital bed. Often that widow is lifted up during church financial appeals as an example of the giving Jesus appreciates. Certainly it is true that the trust and gratitude with which we give is more important to Jesus than the amount we give. But it wasn’t trust and gratitude that impressed me when Helen wrote her check. I distinctly remember feeling that her gift bordered on being irrational, that it was something I should discourage. The scripture doesn’t tell us what motivated the widow to give her two copper coins. But this I know: this kind of giving evokes feelings both of freedom and discomfort. Helen’s gift freed me from worry about our church’s finances. At the same time, taking that check made me feel like a devourer of widow’s houses. And, as I compared her giving to my own, I felt myself squirming in the awareness that my giving didn’t demonstrate as much trust in God as Helen’s did. We are right to think twice before we hold up giving like the widow’s, or like Helen’s, as a proper model for our support of the church and its ministry.

So what does the generosity of widows tell us about faithful stewardship? I hear their giving saying this: Stewardship is primarily an act of trust in God. Therefore, the giver benefits from giving more than the receiver. The basic benefit of faithful stewardship is freedom from anxiety about having enough. This benefit to the giver is proportional to the extent that the gift is concrete and risky. That’s a message with power sufficient to transform not just our giving, but our whole lives. It’s a

message that is hard to swallow whole. But God is helping us to take it in, one bite at a time.

We are coming to the close of our “Repairers of the Breach” campaign. This is a special appeal to give over and above our regular support of the church in order to decrease— or, if we achieve our goal, even eliminate — the unsustainable deficit in our operating budget. That sounds like what our church needs is money. But that is only true from a worldly point of view. From the widows’ point of view, this is an appeal for us to concretely and gratefully demonstrate our trust in God.

The Church of Jesus Christ is many things. It is Christ’s continuing presence in the world. It is a community where people deepen their relationship with God, where we discover the healing support of Christian community, and where we participate in Christ’s continuing mission to the world. The church is also a gathered demonstration of a group of people’s trust in God. Each of our individual gifts contribute to the witness of the church as we give ourselves away so that the world may know the love of Christ. What this church needs, at the root, is trust in God—beginning with our personal trust, but out of that, trust as a community that God has need of us, and that God has given us what we need to do what God wants us to be doing in our time. Giving money is nothing more, and nothing less, than a demonstration of our trust in God. That is what we most need. It is out of that trust that we give. Apart from that trust, we are not the church.

This appeal, while it certainly is critical for this church’s sustainability, is only a financial campaign. To reduce faithful stewardship to a financial campaign is like trying to put an ocean in a bottle. All of life is a stewardship. God has entrusted our bodies, our minds, and our souls to our stewardship. God is calling us to care for our neighbors, for the earth, the water, and the air. God’s desire is that our whole being would be for the sake of God’s glory, because God knows that we are most fulfilled when God is most glorified. The way we respond to a church financial appeal is an acted parable—like the widow’s gift to the treasury, like Helen’s gift from her hospital bed. It opens us up to God’s abundance, and allows us to realize the benefits of trusting God. The power of that realizing will affect not only our participation in this church and the health of the ministry to which God calls us as a congregation. It is power to transform our whole lives. So as you become a repairer of the breach, as you make your gift, watch, in faith, for what God will do with it.