

Lec 32B, November 10, 2024

1 Kings 17:8-16, Psalm 146; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

St Paul Newark—Barbara Melosh

Today we hear about two widows, both of whom face situations of extreme scarcity, and both of whom respond with extravagant generosity. Talk about perfect timing, as we watch the rocket in the narthex ascend, a visual sign of the progress of this year's pledging campaign.

The immediate aim of our stewardship campaign, of course, is financial support for the ministry of this congregation. But stewardship involves much more than that. It is an invitation and a call to discipleship. As some have said, "Stewardship is everything we do after we say "I believe."

The writer of Mark brings us into a scene in the Jerusalem temple where Jesus is observing people as they bring their offerings of money. What we don't hear today is what comes before—the priests, scribes, and elders have challenged Jesus, and he has responded with parables and rebuttals. So these authorities are angry with him—but in the sentence right before our reading today, Mark tells us, "...the large crowd was listening to him with delight."

So when Jesus observes the offering and notes the widow who is giving all that she has, he is also rebuking the temple authorities—those who "devour widows' houses." This story is often the subject of stewardship sermons, and interpreted as an example of sacrificial giving. Yes—but it is more than that. This is a story about the church's stewardship. At every Council meeting, at every annual meeting, we hold ourselves accountable for our use of the money this congregation has given. Our leaders are responsible in law—Council members are fiduciaries. And we are accountable to one another and to God.

In 1 Kings, there is famine on the land because God's people have turned from God to worship Baal. God had commanded Elijah to go to the wadi, a source of water in the desert, and God sends ravens to feed the prophet with meat and bread. But then the wadi dries up—and again, God provides. This time, God sends Elijah to seek help from a very unexpected source—

unexpected because she is herself in desperate need of help, and also because she is an outsider, a Gentile.

He finds her gathering sticks and asks her for a little water and some bread. At first she refuses. “As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.”

Would anyone here blame this widow for refusing to give her and her son’s last meal to a stranger? It’s a stark example of an economy of scarcity—she is in desperate need, at the end of her limited resources. We often experience ourselves as living in that kind of economy, too. There’s only so much to go around, whether it’s money or time or love, and we worry that if we give too much away, there won’t be enough for us. But I’ve noticed a curious thing in what is now almost twenty years of ministry. It’s the congregations who have the most who worry most about money.

Here in 1 Kings, the situation is absolutely desperate—a matter of life and death. But outrageously, Elijah doesn’t take no for an answer. He tells the widow, Go ahead and do what you said—make that last meal for yourself and your son, but first, feed me. And then he tells her that God has promised, “The jar of meal would not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail” until it rains again and food is more plentiful. She does what he asks, and sure enough, there is enough for all—she gives out of her poverty, and God gives out of God’s abundance.

I find myself in a reflective mode these days, as I prepare to complete my ministry with you and return to retirement. So as I thought about stewardship this week, I returned in memory to the congregation that called me in 2005, and to two people there who I was blessed to know and serve.

That congregation had been in decline for forty years when I arrived. At every annual meeting we contemplated a budget that predicted a shortfall—first a few thousand, ultimately tens of thousands. These meetings then usually involved some grim observations about our prospects but then the congregation would stoically vote to approve a deficit budget. What else could we do? This was a blue collar

congregation—electricians, plumbers, truck drivers; but in some cases, minimum-wage workers at Walmart. Our older members, I knew, lived on fixed incomes, and for most that meant Social Security. They were not drawing down asset portfolios or taking distributions from IRAs or relying on six or seven figure savings accounts.

Enter John and Madeline.

John was a World War II veteran who had survived the Normandy invasion. He sometimes recalled that day—the churning water red with blood, men wounded and drowning all around him. Even in his last days, he was deeply troubled by the killing he had done during his service. For years after the war, he could not bring himself to go to church. But finally he did return, and by the time I arrived he and Madeleine had long been active members. Every Sunday they were in the pews. Madeleine's cakes were featured at every funeral and many coffee hours. John brought cucumbers and tomatoes and scallions from his small garden.

They lived in a very modest brick house that had been built right after the war, secured by the GI Bill and by benefits John received as a wounded veteran. The neighborhood was still tidy and mostly well kept, but it was now right on the edge of one of Baltimore's most active drug markets. John had worked as a clerk in a hardware store until his retirement, and Madeleine worked in an umbrella factory. They had no children and had never owned a car.

Back to the annual meeting. As we glumly contemplated the budget, John struggled to his feet. He raised a finger in the air and began, "Some of us are living on Social Security."

I groaned inwardly. (God forgive me for that)

He swiveled to look around the room. "We're getting a raise this year. The working man isn't getting that. It's up to us to give more."

He sat down again. Most of the older members looked at the floor. Then he and Madeleine began to whisper to each other, and since they were both hearing impaired, this wasn't quiet. I began to feel annoyed.

Then John got up again. "Me and my wife are going to give another \$5,000." He and Madeleine beamed, their faces lit.

After the meeting, the financial secretary and a couple of others cornered me. "Pastor," the financial secretary admonished. "You can't let them do that. They might need that money."

We took the money.

Fast forward a few more years. John was failing, and they sold their house and moved to a single room in an assisted living facility. When I visited he asked about the congregation, as he always did. Then he grabbed my arm and told me, with pride and wonderment, "I've got a million. Yeah. We saved a million." He planned to leave some of that to the church.

He died soon after, and Madeleine followed soon after him.

At that point, the congregation had spent down the last of the savings that we had from memorial donations. We met the payroll that month with a personal loan from the treasurer.

And then, we got a letter from Madeleine's brother, the executor of her estate. John and Madeleine had left a legacy of \$150,000, fifteen per cent of their estate.

That congregation is still open. Still struggling. Still living off a last handful of meal and a little oil.

Thanks be to God for all the saints who have loved and served Christ's church. And thanks be to God for your extravagant generosity, and for the abundance of God.