

Sunday: November 8, 2009

Scripture: Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17; Psalm 146; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

Title: "Talking About Stewardship"

Call to Worship: Psalm 127

Chorus: Praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord, O my soul!
I will praise the Lord as long as I live.
I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

First Reader: Do not put your trust in princes.....
...on that very day their plans perish. (Chorus)

Second Reader: Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob....
...who gives food to the hungry. (Chorus)

Third Reader: The Lord sets the prisoners free....
...but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

Chorus: The Lord will reign forever,
Your God, O Zion, for all generation.
Praise the Lord!

Hymns: #2103 We Have Come at Christ's Own Biding
#2128 Come and Find the Quiet Center
#2162 Grace Alone

Prayer of Confession: Eternal God, we pray to you asking that Your Kingdom will Come, but we are confused about that Kingdom. We too often think of Your Kingdom as our own worldly existence. We fall into the trap of thinking that Your Kingdom will simply be like our earthly kingdom, only bigger and better. Forgive us for being confined in our thinking and not understanding that Your Kingdom is not about things and possessions. Help us to see Your Kingdom in the hungry eyes of starving children in Rwanda or in the dying children of war torn Iraq and Afghanistan. Give us wisdom to envision Your Kingdom not as a place but as a relationship between all mankind who acknowledge You as the One True Lord of heaven and earth. We pray this in the name of Christ who came so that Your Kingdom will surely come. Amen.

Sunday: November 8, 2009

Scripture: Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17; Psalm 127; Mark 12:38-44

Title: “Not What You Give, but How!” or “Talking About Stewardship”

This is a very disturbing passage, because if we gave like the widow who “gave everything she had, all she had to live on.” Then we would end up penniless. We’d end up like her.

How often have we heard sermons based on this passage during the stewardship season of the Church? Preachers love to pull this passage out when it is time to have the members fill in their pledge cards for next year. The preacher says to himself, “if I can hold up this poor widow as an example, perhaps I can make the members feel so guilty that they will increase their giving for next year.” And, to my knowledge, it rarely works. Church budgets are not built on guilt. They are built on joy and commitment to the total mission of the Church. To use guilt is one of the highest forms of hypocrisy.

Speaking of hypocrisy, observe how Jesus warns us about it.

Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearances say long prayers. They will receive their greater condemnation.

Mark wants us readers to understand the sharp contrast between those who make a show of religion and those who practice their faith, even to the point of giving their last two coins. I seriously doubt if Mark thought, as he was putting his biography of Jesus together, that preachers 2000 years later would be lifting up the widow as an example of sacrificial giving. No, the real stewardship that is captured by this comparison between the Scribes and the Widow has very little to do with money, although money does play into it a bit. Pete Perry, Presbyterian Minister and Director of the Montreat Conference Center asks this question:

Does Jesus point to the poor widow who gives her last two coins to the temple as a model for giving? Or does Jesus point to her because she is a tragic example of how religious institutions suck the life out of people?

This is an important question. It comes directly out of the passage where Jesus paints the picture of the Scribes and their egotistical flaunting of their positions in society, and then he turns right around and paints the picture of the very widow whom the scribes have fleeced.

We are talking here about where our hearts are. Isn't it interesting that Jesus does not make note of how much the rich people gave to the Temple. Mark simply notes that they put in “large sums”. Mark puts this story of contributing to the temple treasury right after

the condemnation of the Scribes who make a show out of religion while in their real life they are scamming widow ladies out of their homes and their last two coins. I believe Mark wanted his readers to gain a new insight into what stewardship is all about. And it has little to do with money. It has to do with our love and concern for those who are less fortunate than us. It has to do with how we allow the love and grace of God work out in our lives.

There is a danger in any organized religion that the emphasis of that religion will focus on the institution and not on the individuals that religion serves. At what point do we here at Altavista Presbyterian fall into the trap of existing simply to keep the organization afloat? I can tell you, after 40 years of pasturing mostly small rural congregations, that this is precisely what it felt like at times. Let me give you an example.

My last church before retiring was Asbury Presbyterian Church, about 15 miles east of Mt. Airy, NC. It was a good country church with some fine folks in it. But it existed by a thread. There were times when we worried if we could pay the light bill for the month, much less the pastor's salary. At times it seemed as if we existed to provide a burial place for the family members. There was no sense of mission. No outreach. Now, just five miles away was the little Collinstown Presbyterian Church, and five miles from that was the _____ Presbyterian Church. Each church had a membership of 35 to 60 members. Each Church had its building and its cemetery, and each church was scrounging to make ends meet. Together, they could have been a congregation of 150. Together they could have directed their energies toward missions and outreach. But, as they were, they simply sucked the folks dry to keep the lights lit and the oil bill paid. What egos were being massaged. What personal glory was being enhanced by remaining separate? As the pastor, I had to deal with elders who wanted to dictate policy. Heads of families who absolutely would not listen to a discussion of forming one congregation that could carry on a total church program. The churches were situated in the form of a triangle with each church at one of the points with only five miles between each church. I suggested that we find a common spot in the middle of the triangle and build a common worship center, but that we maintain each building and cemetery. In the summer we could hold joint vacation bible school, we could have a yearly revival service, we could develop a food pantry and a clothes closet, we could support Presbytery causes and we could have a joint youth group. Instead of having one or two women's circles we would be able to have five or six meetings at different times of the week. And we could have one large men of the Church organization that could really bite off some needed mission projects.

Well, you can imagine what happened to this wonderful idea. And it wasn't just mine. Many of the grass roots members dreamed of a more vibrant church where mission and ministry could take precedence over building maintenance.

There is no doubt that Jesus looked at some of the religious leaders of his day, the scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees and members of the Sanhedren and thought: These people believe that the Temple belongs to them. How sad. One time Jesus even went up

on a mountain overlooking Jerusalem and the scriptures simply say that he wept. In today's vernacular I believe Jesus would say: "Hey, it's not about you."

Isn't that what the widow was saying with her two last coins? "It's not about me."

Isn't that what we are saying each year as we prepare a budget that stretches us and reaches out to the helpless and the needy of this world. "It's not about us."

Each year, when we come to budget time and the signing of pledges, we need to remind ourselves that it really is not about us. It is about the ministry of Christ in this community and around the world. It is about how we are going to commit ourselves not to this building, but to the ministry for which this building stands.

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