

The Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 27, Year B
November 8, 2015
Stewardship

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1 Kings 17:8-16
Hebrews 9:24-28
Mark 12:38-44

From the Gospel: “Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living.” In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today I am going to tell you how to have a happy, joyful life. I get to preach about one of the most joyful things a priest ever gets to speak about—giving. Yup, this is the stewardship sermon for which you have all be eagerly waiting.

Today after the service we will gather for a meal and celebrate the kickoff of our Capital Campaign and the annual Stewardship Visitation. The readings from the Hebrew scriptures and from the Gospel invite us to consider our attitudes about giving. Neither tell us how much we should give, but rather how we should give.

The story of the Prophet Elijah’s visit to the widow of Zarephath emphasizes that we should make our gift to God and God’s work first, before we take care of our own needs. It is a time of famine, and God sends Elijah to the widow’s house. When he asks for water and bit of bread, she explains that she is about to go home and bake the last of her flour for one last meal for her son and herself and then they will starve. Elijah’s next demand is outrageous. He tells her to feed him first. This is crazy, but she does it anyway. And the small amount of flour and oil is not exhausted. In fact day by day, she finds that there is

always enough. This reminds us of the way God fed the children of Israel in the wilderness with manna, the miracle food from heaven every day. The Israelites could gather enough for each day, but no more. If they tried to gather extra for another day, it would go bad. So also Jesus teaches us to pray for our daily bread, not for extra, but for the bread we need for today. So we are taught that when we make our gift to God first, we will always have enough.

The story from the Gospel, is about proportionate giving. Jesus does not say how much we should give. He simply points out that, although many rich people gave significant amounts to the temple, the widow who gave her two small coins gave all that she had. This is just as crazy as the widow of Zarephath. Jesus makes no other comment. He does not say we should give all we have, he simply points out that her gift was proportionately far larger. She gave her whole life. The clear implication is that we should give in proportion to what we have. It is also a statistical fact that poor people in this country give far more to their churches as a proportion of their income than do rich people.

So we should give in proportion to our wealth, and we should make our giving to God our first priority. But we are still left with the question of how much we should give. The Episcopal Church has declared that the tithe or a tenth of one's income is the "minimum standard for giving." That may sound like a lot, until one remembers that we get to use the other ninety percent for our own purposes. In fact it is far less than the amount given by either of the two widows in today's readings. They both gave everything they had. If we make our tithe first then we can adjust our other expenses to the rest. The flour and oil will not run out. Alinda and I were fortunate in that we began tithing when we were first married and had very little. Then when we were considering purchasing a house, we could

budget our mortgage payment based on our income after the tithe. Similarly with other expenses such vehicles or education. We made our decisions about those after deducting the tithe first. For those who already have commitments to large expenditures and then want to give a tithe it is more difficult. In that case one possibility is to calculate what percentage of their income they are currently giving and then increase it by one percent of income each year, until they reach the desired level. Whether we tithe or not, it is important to give enough so that our lives are impacted by our giving, so that our other decision are affected. In any case, the firstness is more important than the tenthness.

This year we are giving in two different ways at the same time. First and most important is our giving to the annual budget of the church. We are asking everyone to consider a substantial increase to their pledge for that. This is what pays for the basic operations of the church—salaries, maintenance, support fort the diocese and national church, and support for seminaries and other partnerships in mission. Our current budget underfunds some important areas and we need to fund it more robustly. I encourage everyone to consider how they might work toward giving a tithe of their income to this annual pledge.

In addition to the annual pledge, this year we are also asking that everyone consider making a substantial gift to the Capital Campaign. This will pay for major repairs to the roof and stonework of the building and for at least one and hopefully two of the unfinished stained glass windows. These pledges will be paid over three years and typically come not from income but from savings and assets.

Alinda and I have made our pledges for the annual budget and to the capital campaign. Alinda and I derive great joy from giving at this level, and we want each of you to

experience this joy of giving. I invite every one of you, not to give until it hurts, but quite the contrary. Give until it feels great.

The word “stewardship” is often used in talking about our giving as Christians. The idea is that we don’t actually own anything; God owns everything. What we normally think of as ours—our bodies, our talents, our possessions, our time, our money—we really hold from God in trust to be used for God’s purposes. That is we are stewards. This is fine, but it can have the effect of making our giving into a duty and an obligation for which we will be answerable on the day of judgment. It feels heavy, another “ought” imposed on us by our religion.

The other biblical idea is the idea of sacrifice. In this way of thinking we make our gift out of love and joy and gratitude. God is good to us, and we offer up all that we can to express our love for God and our eagerness to participate God’s making of the all things new. That is we are invited to God’s party of renewing the world. It’s a pot luck, and we bring our offering to join with everyone else’s, including God’s. And then, what a feast!

Most of all I invite you into the joy that comes from significant, sacrificial giving. It brings satisfaction and compassion and helps us savor life. It helps us be in better relationship to the rest of our possessions. It increases our compassion and our desire to do more. I am convinced that there is not one of us in this room today, who will not discover greater joy, freedom, peace of mind, faith, and love, if we show our thankfulness to God through our giving. The more we give, the better we feel. Think how good it feels to give a good gift to your spouse or child or dear friend. There is a reason that Christmas is our most popular holiday. It is all about giving. Nothing brings more joy.

We in this parish have been given so much. Let us be generous. Let us give as God gives. Let's do it. Do not give until it hurts. Give until it feels good. Giving the way the two widows gave may seem crazy, but as our new Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, is fond of saying, we are called to be crazy Christians. Giving like this is both counter-intuitive and counter-cultural. But is sure is fun.

Jesus did not commend the widow. He just pointed her out to the disciples. Hey, look at her. Wow! What do you make of that? What do you make of a woman who is willing to give everything to God? What does that make you want to do? How does that touch your heart? Amen.