

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost/November 8, 2015

The Reverend E. Clifford Cutler

“A poor widow came and put in(to the treasury) two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.” So begins a common parable of Jesus’ time that he utilized for this teaching. It is an ambivalent tale. It sets up a contrast between the affluent scribes and the impoverished woman. We can sense Jesus’ disgust at the scribes’ exploitation of this woman who lives on the margins. At the same time in the story he is fascinated watching this woman who is beneath everyone else’s attention. He sees her unselfconsciously, freely, proudly place her two coins in the offering.

It was the calling of the scribes to protect widows. They were to seek justice. Instead, in exchange for prolonged prayer they took what little money the widows had. This tale still has currency, so to speak. Carl Sandburg wrote a poem in 1916 called, “To a Contemporary Bunkshooter.

“Jesus had a way of talking soft, and outside of a few bankers and higher-ups among the con men of Jerusalem everybody liked to have this Jesus around because he never made any fake passes and everything he said went, and he helped the sick and gave the people hope.

You (contemporary bunkshooter) tell people living in shanties Jesus is going to fix it up all right with them by giving them mansions in the skies after they’re dead...

You tell \$6 a week department store girls all they need is Jesus....

You tell poor people they don’t need any more money on pay day and even if it’s fierce to be out of a job, Jesus’ll fix that up all right, all right—all they gotta do is take Jesus the way you say.

I’ m telling you Jesus wouldn’t stand for the stuff you’re handing out.”

Sandburg catches Jesus' disgust with exploitation, and the irony of it now taking place in Jesus' own name. Sixty years later *The Rolling Stones*, in a rock and roll song called "Far Away Eyes," poke some fun at a Christian radio station that would take money from the gullible. "Well the preacher kept right on saying," the song goes, "that all I had to do was send ten dollars to the church of the sacred bleeding heart of Jesus located somewhere in Los Angeles, California and next week they'd say my prayer on the radio and all my dreams would come true."

Well, this is perhaps a strange way to start a stewardship sermon. But any discussion of giving should take into account what it is not. Giving is not pursuing or permitting injustice. It is not accepting the fact that some people live in shanties or have nowhere to live at all. That is why part of God's mission here is to lift up the homeless. The pottery bowls at the back of the church, many made by our children, testify to our partnership with the Philadelphia Interfaith Hospitality Network and its Empty Bowl Supper supporting their work among the homeless. It is not alright to go to bed hungry because you will get plenty by and by. Tuesday evening in an adult Christian education session we face the injustice of racism. It is not for one people to exploit another. Both need to be freed to be fully and truly themselves.

Giving is not a fake pass, as though all your dreams will come true in exchange for a pledge to Saint Paul's. You might as well play a lottery ticket. Rather giving is letting go of control in order to entrust ourselves to God's mission for the wellbeing of all. Giving builds community at every scale. It is hard work. It takes our time, our talents, our treasure. It is not a fake pass.

We don't even give to sustain a building. We do not let the cost of a building devour the resources of the poor. The Temple was beautiful and majestic. You'll remember just a few lines on in the next chapter of Mark's Gospel, the disciples exclaimed, "Look, what large stones and what large buildings!" Jesus famously responded, "Not one stone will be left here upon another." The church building exists in the service of God and God's people. If the building does not enhance our prayer and praise and mission then it has become an empty shell, of no more use than a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. Instead, our giving sustains a vibrant place of love. The slates on its

roof are love. The patched masonry is love. It all works together to build up a place of love, a house of prayer for all people.

Jesus wouldn't stand for the stuff of injustice, fakery, or bling, nor did he; and especially in his name. Moving away from the scribes, what did he see in the poor widow and her gift? Because the story is not just about his disgust. There is also a note of admiration. Amidst those who wear elaborate robes and are used to the best seats, and the many rich people, here comes this woman with next to nothing. She takes her place among them. Jesus understands that giving conveys dignity. Everyone has a need to give and have their gift accepted. It is universal.

Giving expresses our commitment. The root of the word commitment means to join and connect. We call today Commitment Sunday because our pledge joins us to God's purpose for the wellbeing of all. We are not just connecting to Saint Paul's but with the larger intention of God for justice, community, and a place of prayer and praise for everyone.

I have one last worry about the stories of giving we have heard this morning. It troubles me that the widow of Zarephath and her son have little left but to die, and Elijah asks for even that. Bring me the morsel of bread in your hand. Make me a little cake. How can he possibly ask that? Then it occurs to me that the miracle has already been accomplished. The jar of meal will not be emptied, nor will the jug of oil fail her. She can give her all because of what already has been done.

In the same way, we can give because for us too the miracle has already been accomplished. Jesus appeared once for all to remove the sin of injustice, isolation, indignity. Are we ready to connect with that, to give for that? Like the widow of Zarephath, we do not need to be afraid. To give is not loss, it is love, and love is stronger than death. The miracle of Jesus' death and resurrection, like the meal and oil that will not fail, has already been done for us. Jesus is the bread of life that will not fail. "I am the bread of life," he said. "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6: 35). And again, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the

bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (John 6: 51). We can give because the miracle of Jesus’ sacrifice for us has already been accomplished.

Both widows were all in. They didn’t hold back. They were fully committed to God’s work that was all about life and the overcoming of fear. Nobody else sees this. But I can imagine Jesus watching intently, shaking his head with a bit of a smile. This woman gets it. She knows what God has done for her – not the bunk, not the dream, but the reality of love, life, self-worth, inclusion. Hers is a THANKSgiving. She is participating in God’s design for a just world. And so do we. We commit. We entrust ourselves to God’s purpose for the wellbeing of all. There is plenty of exploitation around but you won’t find it here. Like the widow we unselfconsciously, freely, proudly, place our pledge in the offering. We are joining up with God’s work of love. The miracle has already been accomplished. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. Love swallows up loss, fear, and death. Love pursues justice, builds community, and affords a vibrant place of praise and prayer for all. That’s why we pledge. That’s why we give. That’s why we love.

Amen.