

8 November 2015 (24th Sunday After Pentecost/32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time)
Lafayette Presbyterian Church
“Stewards of Wealth”
Mark 12:38-44

What exactly do we mean by “wealth”? Is it always material, or is it found in the measure of our experiences and relationships, or is it a combination of both—what we are and what we have? The Bible presents a complicated set of attitudes toward material wealth. For example, after Job suffers the devastating loss of his fortune and his health, and then must endure the unsolicited advice and preaching of his friends, we read that God restores his fortunes and blesses him with more goods and property than he had before. God’s favor and blessing seem to come to Job in the form of material wealth. But it isn’t just Job. In Proverbs Chapter 9 we read, “A rich man’s wealth is his strong city; the poverty of the poor is their ruin,” and in Chapter 20, “Love not sleep, lest you come to poverty; open your eyes, and you will have plenty of bread.” The moral of the story? Wisdom brings wealth, and folly leads to financial ruin. The author of Ecclesiastes is cynical about the power of wealth to bring happiness, but readily acknowledges the advantages of prosperity over adversity. Most people don’t choose a life of material poverty. To one degree or another, we want wealth for security, or to help us achieve our goals, or to enjoy relationships. Not extreme wealth, not millions, but enough. But how much is enough?

In the Gospels, Jesus typically overturns conventional wisdom about wealth, whether it is the cultural wisdom of the generations before him, the culture of his own time, or our own culture. The teachings of Jesus about wealth transcend time and space, they are relevant to all times and places, and they directly address the issue of wealth’s meaning and purpose in the Kingdom of God. Against the prevailing religious and cultural values of his day, can you appreciate how exciting and disarming Jesus’ words sounded to people when he said, “Blessed are the poor?” In Matthew’s Gospel, the teaching is, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” and in Luke’s Gospel it is, “Blessed are the poor”—together both Gospels address the full spectrum of how God views human experience in regard to wealth. In Jesus’ view, revealing as he did the mind of God, the blessings of God belong already to those who are materially and spiritually poor. Those who lack the fortune of Job, who are despised and looked down upon by the prosperous, are held in great favor by God. Alongside those who mourn, who are powerless, who are hungry and thirsty, the poor are in the same company as the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers. They are all in the company of God and inhabit the Kingdom of God. They have enough, for they have all they need. In the Kingdom of God the poor are wealthy.

This foundation of Jesus’ teaching is crucial for understanding how we as Christ’s disciples are stewards of wealth, of all that we are and have. Perhaps all measures of wealth are relative and difficult to compare: this person may possess more things than that person, and that person may have more investments than this person. This one over here may have a larger house than that person, and that person may have more cash in the bank than this one. But what they all have in common is that they are stewards,

guardians, caretakers, of all that they have and all that they are. What is more, in the economy of God, each one has been given a life of abundance and fullness, regardless of their material wealth, their natural talents, or their spiritual gifts. God has created each of them a unique, unrepeatable mystery, and has entrusted them with two specific tasks: to nurture their gifts, and to share those gifts with the world.

In the Gospel reading this morning from Mark Chapter 12, this is how Jesus sees the poor widow who deposits two coins in the temple treasury. How do you see her? Is she poor, or is she wealthy? Is she a good steward? Of what value is her meager contribution? Of what possible use are two small copper coins to the operation of a large temple complex? In the big picture, those two small coins are but two drops in the bucket, barely noticeable, and probably better left in her pocket to pay for living expenses. And if she were worshiping with us today, we might encourage her to hold on to her money so that she can have enough to live on. “Let someone else give,” we might say. “Let someone else who has disposable income and wealth to spare contribute to the church.”

But let’s look again at what Jesus observes about this poor widow. In the eyes of God the importance of her contribution isn’t in the amount she gives, but in what the money means in the context of her life. What Jesus recognizes in the spirit of this widow is that she gave her life—she gave “out of her poverty,” he says. It didn’t cost as much for the wealthy to give out of their abundance. But it did cost the widow a lot more to give sacrificially out of her love for the temple as a place of worship, out of her love for God as the author of her life. Would you say that the widow was a good steward of her wealth, such as it was, a faithful guardian and caretaker of what she had? Some might raise a question about her priorities, but it all depends on how one chooses to invest in the source and meaning of one’s life.

A text such as this that we find in Mark’s Gospel can leave us seriously wondering what kind of stewards of wealth Jesus calls us to be. How much are we really required to give? And yet, in the realm of God, Jesus would have us understand that that is not quite the right question. The primary issue we must come to terms with is not how much of our wealth, talents, and gifts we will offer, but why we offer them. There is a wonderful story told by journalist Anna Badkhen from the years she spent covering war zones like Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2001, she traveled through a small Afghan village that was about to starve because they had no food, and no access to food. There had been a long, long drought. The nearest market town was 17 hours on foot, and they had no cars. She stopped by a little lean-to that served as a shop in the village for necessities like soap, matches, and olive oil. The owner was just about to close the shop for the winter because there was simply no need for his wares—if you don’t have anything to cook with cooking oil, then who needs it? But because she was passing through, the owner saw her as a guest, and he automatically became the host. He didn’t have any food either, but he shared what he had with her: a fistful of gnarled, green, very dry raisins. She describes how he poured those raisins into her palm and apologized that he couldn’t give her anything more. But she understood that he was giving away a day’s sustenance to her, a

complete stranger. In her eyes, what he gave her that day was worth more than a plate full of food at the much larger feasts she would later enjoy in Iraq.

Anna Badkhen's story makes me think of the account of the widow of Zarephath that we heard from 1 Kings 17, as she prepared food for the prophet Elijah from what little she had, even as she despaired for her life and the very real possibility of starvation. The story in 1 Kings notes how the widow's resources were miraculously replenished as she served one of God's prophets. But of course, the widow did not know that outcome when Elijah approached her for help. By her own admission, she and her son were preparing to die. And yet, by recovering the role of host and reclaiming the importance of welcoming the stranger, the widow and her son lived, and Elijah regained his strength.

This profound story of life regained and strength restored out of perceived poverty and deprivation reminds us of how God works in the world through people of faith who are willing to invest what they have in the Kingdom of God. Like the Afghan shop owner whose handful of raisins sustained a hungry journalist, like the starving widow whose gift of bread with the last handful of meal she had, sustained the prophet Elijah, like the poor widow whose two copper coins sustained the temple's ministry in the time of Jesus, what we give from our poverty is evidence of the wealth God has given us. And to be stewards of that wealth, the wealth we don't think we have, is what defines the Kingdom of God, because it comes from deep within us as joyful sacrifice. In his day, Jesus was sickened by the scribes he saw parading around in long robes, looking for attention in the marketplace, cultivating dinner invitations so that they could be served at others' expense rather than to be servants themselves—and he deplored the show of wealth that had become associated with religion. That is why he celebrated the humility of the poor widow who gave all she had, from the heart.

In our life together, we are similarly invited to reconsider the way we perceive what we are, what we have, and what it's for. As stewards of wealth, we give and we love because of all that God has given to us, and because of how God loves us. If you believe in your heart that this church is spreading the Gospel, and that its mission and ministry play an indispensable role in the life and sustenance of this community, then God is calling you to be a steward of all that you are and have. What sort of caretaker and guardian of your gifts will you be? As we learn from the varied witness of the Scriptures, wealth is complicated. It comprises our material possessions and privileges, our natural talents and acquired skills, and our spiritual gifts that the Holy Spirit has given us. In short, "wealth" has to do with the whole package. Stewardship has to do with nurturing what we are and have, and then sharing that whole package with the world. And Christ will take what we give and multiply it in ways we could never have imagined on our own.



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