



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: November 8, 2009

My Cup Runneth Over, Shanon A. White

Mark 12:38-45

It's November, and it's stewardship season. The lectionary readings aid preachers in this time of year with scripture readings which help us talk about...one of the biggest taboos in our spiritual life together...money. Why don't we like to talk about money? We all have it. We all use it. It's the foundation of our economy. So why has talking about it been such a big deal for thousands of years? Clergy don't help the effort.

In a book entitled *Plain Talk about Churches and Money*, one of the authors states: "Clergy often come to their calling with a distinct aversion to conflict and to having to deal with money issues. Our culture seems to reinforce them in that behavior. So long as clergy are cowed and anxious in the face of money and wealth, they will remain silent about the spiritual issue that touches our culture more deeply than any other. The more I steeped myself in this book and looked at churches around me, the more I became convinced this behavior is the way a culture controls a challenge to itself. A money-driven culture seems to want clergy who are 'safe' and 'tame' when dealing with the spiritual dimension of money."

That's true. So let's get this out of the way. We all know the church, among many other organizations needs money to run and do it's work. Please return your pledge cards. Thank you to those of you who have. Now you can relax. Let's move on.

The scripture lesson this morning is a classic. It's commonly known as the "Widow's mite" but it is anything BUT a common story. Unfortunately this story has been used in some sermons to bop people over the head and guilt them into giving during this time of the year. How can we measure up to a poor woman gives everything she has? None of us can...The fact that she is a widow adds to the impact.

According to national statistics from 2007, there were 37 million people in poverty in the United States. About 10 percent of all Americans age 65 and over live in poverty. That's about 5.6

million people. And two-thirds of those are women.

Princeton University Professor Dr. David Miller, who will be our Thorne Lecturer in January, says those statistics translate into real life this way: “Perhaps it does not surprise us then, when we hear about someone like ‘Eleanor,’ who during 30 years of marriage did all her shopping with cash doled out by her husband. She had never written a check, until after her husband died when he was only fifty-two. Suddenly widowed, Eleanor had to learn about household bills, retirement plans, insurance proceeds, taxes, interest rates--all things her husband had taken care of.

Not all widows find themselves in Eleanor’s position, of course. But many of us still expect widows to need special care. The situation in Jesus’ day was even bleaker. Without a husband, a woman had lost her major source of protection and identity. Even a widow who had a son or other male relative to look out for her was vulnerable to those who might take advantage of her.”

Yet our story says this woman, this widow gave unabashedly. Some may have said...she was crazy. Didn’t she know she wouldn’t have anything left if she gave it all? Didn’t she know to keep some reserves? What would she do if she got sick in her older age?

While Jesus may have been referring to issues of money in this story, I think as usual, he’s going far deeper. I think Jesus was referring to our attitudes and our hearts as well as our wallets.

Have you even been channel surfing and come across an old movie that you made you stop and watch? That happened to me last week. I caught a glimpse of “Hope Floats,” a 1998 flick that didn’t do that well at the box office. It stars Sandra Bullock, Harry Connick, Jr and Geena Rowlands. It’s about a beautiful, young woman (Birdie Pruitt, played by Bullock) who was full of life, ambition and charisma. She married a beautiful man, had a beautiful baby (named Bernice) and they had a beautiful life. But after a few years, things started to change. Her husband ended up running off with another woman, abandoning Birdie and her daughter. Birdie and Bernice move back to Texas with Birdie’s mother, Ramona (Geena Rowlands). Over the course of the movie it is clear that Birdie is still carrying wounds of a childhood with a mother who loved her but had a difficult time showing any affection whatsoever. Ramona has evidently found a spring of love and IS able to shower it on her granddaughter. Little Bernice, who blames her mother for her parent’s failed marriage holds a stiff arm up to Birdie, but welcomes in the love of her grandmother. One night, as Bernice is tucked into bed by Ramona...Bernice tells her grandmother how much she loves her...to which her love-starved grandmother replies, “My cup runneth over.”

What is it that allows some people to shower their love of life onto the world and others to be stingy and calculated with it? You’ve known both kinds, I imagine. Extreme stereotypes are

Mother Teresa and Ebenezer Scrooge. But most of us live somewhere in between and have a little of both in us.

A discussion was taking place in Farmer John's barnyard between a pig and a chicken. The pig said, "I've noticed that Farmer John is walking around very depressed these days. The farm isn't doing so well, and he seems very upset. Let's think of some way we could cheer him up." "I know," said the chicken. "He loves to eat, so let's fix him a great big breakfast! How does ham and eggs sound?" The pig pondered a moment and then said, "Well, the breakfast idea sounds good but the menu bothers me a bit." "Why is that?" the chicken asked. The pig responded, "That breakfast represents a single donation on your part, but of me it requires a personal sacrifice."

Back to our text. Those religious leaders in the synagogue were giving, and maybe even giving sacrificially with substantial sums of money...but they were doing so out of a place of fear and calculation. Perhaps their insecurity made them want to flaunt their money in front of others and try to buy their way into good grace and status. Maybe they thought, "I will give this amount...but I will not give that much because I won't have enough for myself later." Jesus saw through that, as he always does and called them out on the carpet. He was always interested...not in the results...but in the heart behind the action...the motivation. He knows that a heart that is closed and fearful does not lead to a life fully lived. And that is what Jesus is interested in...helping us to live fully and deeply with open hearts. He wants to heal the areas in our lives which prevent us from living from that place. Money is as good a place as any to begin.

In one of his Lake Wobegone stories, Garrison Keillor tells about a Sunday morning in Lake Wobegon Lutheran Church. The sermon has been droning on far too long, and Clarence Bunsen has checked out early. He realizes it's almost time for the offering, so he quietly reaches for his wallet. Upon opening his wallet, Clarence discovers he has no cash. He takes out his pen and hides the checkbook in the middle of his Bible, next to one of the psalms. He begins to scratch out a check for thirty dollars, because he almost had a heart attack that week, and because somebody in the church will count the offering and he wants them to see he gave thirty dollars.

He tries not to be obvious, but a lady to his right sees him. Clarence can tell she thinks he's writing in the pew Bible, so he doesn't look at what he's doing. She gives him a funny stare, and turns back to the sermon. Clarence tries to quietly rip the check out of the checkbook, with limited success, still not looking at what he's doing so the lady in the pew won't know he has written out a check in church. The offering plate comes by, and Clarence proudly puts in the check, only to realize a moment too late that he has just written a check for three hundred dollars. He accidentally wrote three-zero-zero on two different lines when he wasn't looking.

What could he do? On the one hand, he couldn't go downstairs after church and find the deacons counting the collection and say, "Fellows, there's been a mistake. I gave more than I really wanted to." On the other hand, he gave all he had in the checking account and a little more. Perhaps he and his family will have to eat beans and oatmeal for the rest of the month, Clarence thought, even though the contribution was going to a good place. One thing was for sure, notes Keillor. In that moment, Clarence felt fully alive for the first time all day.

There's something that happens in our hearts spiritually when we let go and take a risk on behalf of God. Something happens in the space which is created in us when we ask for help or when give to others. As a result we are changed and revitalized.

Some of you may remember the story I told of Dewey Bozella. He's the man I met at Sing Sing Prison back in 2006 when I did a special television news report on the program offered to inmates through New York Theological Seminary.

Dewey was one of the students I met that day. His fellow inmates suggested I meet him, because he had gone from being an angry 23 year old to a forgiving and kind 47 year old man serving time for manslaughter. Dewey had been convicted by two juries for killing 92 year old Emma Crasper back when he was 17 years old. While Dewey was a troubled teen, he always maintained his innocence. In fact he said he would have been released 18 years ago, if he had just confessed.

A week ago Wednesday, after almost 27 years in prison, and 4 parole boards, Dewey Bozella was exonerated by a judge in Poughkeepsie. Years ago, he started writing the Innocence Project every week...saying "I did not do this crime of which I have been accused." For years he heard nothing. Finally, one day, he got a reply...and his case was referred to WilmerHale, a high powered Manhattan law firm which worked pro bono for over two years to the tune of 950-thousand dollars to free Dewey. They had the resources to find four pieces of evidence which had been repressed years ago that proved Dewey's innocence.

This past Monday, five days after his release, I had the privilege of interviewing Dewey and his wife Trena at his attorney's office. It was his first sit-down interview since his release.

The amazing thing to me was Dewey's resilient and generous spirit. He was not bitter and angry over having lost 27 years of his life. In fact, he said "prison had made me a better man." He got his college and master's degree while there as well as some 50 other certificates of achievement...accomplishments which Dewey says he most likely would not have had, if he had continued living his life on the outside. And in an odd twist, he thanked Emma Crasper for giving him that opportunity to make his life better. He said that he had a lot of time to think about himself and the pain his situation caused his loved ones, which gave him compassion for others and how they may be feeling. That led him to think what Mrs. Crasper went through that night

and what her family must have felt in the wake of her loss. With a deep conviction in his words he said, “She’ll always be a part of my life until the day I die.”

Dewey had every reason to live with calculation and hardness of heart. And for many of his years in prison, he said he did. He was mean and angry over having been wrongly accused. He was a boxing champ. There were times when he didn’t want to live and he gave up hope. But he told me, “God changed my heart” God broke it right open...giving him the ability to face and miraculously forgive his brother’s murderer who came to Sing Sing. It didn’t stop there. The man whose fingerprint was ultimately found at Emma Crasper’s house back in 1977 and who may have been responsible for her death also came to Sing Sing on another charge. Dewey faced him too, not in anger and revenge, but with truth and forgiveness.

Is this scripture about financial giving? Sure...but to leave it there misses the point and allows us to segregate it off to another stewardship sermon. The widow came in essence saying, “My cup runneth over,” take what I have, take who I am...let me be a part, and let me do my part in this living, loving world. And in doing so, she had more than she could ever hope for.