

November 8, 2009

From "The Message" by Eugene Petersen

Mark 12:38-44

He continued teaching. "Watch out for the religion scholars. They love to walk around in academic gowns, preening in the radiance of public flattery, basking in prominent positions, sitting at the head table at every church function. And all the time they are exploiting the weak and helpless. The longer their prayers, the worse they get. But they'll pay for it in the end."

⁴¹⁻⁴⁴Sitting across from the offering box, he was observing how the crowd tossed money in for the collection. Many of the rich were making large contributions. One poor widow came up and put in two small coins—a measly two cents. Jesus called his disciples over and said, "The truth is that this poor widow gave more to the collection than all the others put together. All the others gave what they'll never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn't afford—she gave her all."

Sermon – Susi Kawolics

As most of you know, we are in the midst of our Stewardship campaign here at Bainbridge community church. So on the surface, this seems a very appropriate scripture reading for this time. It speaks for itself – Give all you have. But actually, the first thing that came into my mind as I read this was the way Jesus talks about the large donors to the synagogue. He watches them put in their money, and he implies that they are hypocritical and arrogant. He does not even appreciate that they are giving huge amounts to the synagogue. And I think – he is not someone I would want running my Stewardship campaign. He would not make himself popular with anyone in a charitable organization. Does he not know that one of the major rules for non-profits who rely on the generosity of contributors is that you do not insult your top donors! Can you just imagine what the leaders of the synagogues thought as Jesus put the rich religious men down, and held up the widow, who gave two cents, as an example of how to give?

Jesus forte is obviously **not** business or economics. Or maybe, the fact of the matter is that he just works out of a whole different economic system than the one we live in. So today, let's look at God's economic policy.

The first thing I notice is that it is not very practical. Looking at this passage from a purely pragmatic point of view, here's what we see. The person Jesus holds up for us to emulate is a widow, who is already completely dependent on the generosity of others – giving away her last bit of money. Besides that, she gives it to the institution that is supporting her. In a way, it's like someone giving all their money to a Food pantry, and then asking for food. It just doesn't make a whole lot of sense. She may have been able to buy some food with her money, but by giving all of it away, she becomes totally dependent on however God sees fit to provide for her.

In our country, we prize our independence. We work hard so that we don't have to rely on others. We teach our children to take responsibility, to study so that they can get good jobs. We want the security of knowing that no matter what happens, we will be able to take care of ourselves. There is nothing wrong with this.

But the truth of the matter is, we end up never quite feeling secure enough. If we depend only on our own resources, then we will never feel secure enough to be generous. The widow in our story is an extreme example of generosity. But the bottom line was that even if she had held onto her few cents, she could not have become independent. The system was working against her from the beginning, and there was no way in that time that she would have been able to pull herself out of her situation.

So she lets go of everything, and places her whole future in God's hands. Her faith in God's providence is the trait Jesus holds up for us to emulate, rather than the faith we put in our own resources to save us.

Another of tenet of God's economic theory is that the more you give, the more you get. I don't know about your family budgets, but that's not usually how mine works. The more checks I write, the lower my bank balance becomes. In our lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures, however, we learn about the widow of Zarepheth. She, like the widow in the gospel, has close to nothing. In fact, she is preparing to use the very last of her food to feed herself and her son, and then she expects to die of starvation because she has no food left, and there is a drought in the land. Into this situation comes Elijah, having the nerve to ask her to feed him. Can you just imagine? But the widow ends up trusting him, and she obeys the ancient laws of hospitality requiring one to care for the stranger. So she gives what she has. And that which she shares, she gets back many times over. It becomes enough to see her, her son and Elijah through the drought.

I believe God blesses all we give in good faith, and multiplies it for the good. The way the flour never ran out and the oil never ran dry are metaphors for the way resources expand when they are given up freely to God.

A third way God's economic course would be taught differently than ours is that God does not really care for detailed business plans. We often feel the need to lay out the economy of our lives very meticulously. We plan for our retirement based on our present circumstances, we decide what we can spend, and what we can afford to donate based on our current life situations. Again, this is not a bad thing. We need to be responsible. But living with God's economic rules and acknowledging our dependence on God means that we are to at least be open to other possibilities. It means not setting our own plans in stone. We know that in an economy like the one we are experiencing today, there is a lot of uncertainty. People who have set a course of action are finding that their future does not always go as planned. Those who have lost their work are finding that they may not be able to get the job that they expect to. They may have to resort to Plan B, or C, or even all the way up to Z! By letting ourselves become dependent on God, we are more likely to be open to other possibilities which we had never even dreamed of.

When Elijah was in the desert, he had no plan. He was totally dependent on God. He had no idea where his next meal was would come from. The reason Elijah was in the desert was that he was hiding from the wrath of King Ahab. Just before coming to the place the widow lived, God provided Elijah food by sending ravens to feed him. We know that ravens are scavengers, so these were not exactly gourmet meals the he was enjoying. When God next sends him to seek his nourishment from the widow, Elijah must have really wondered. He goes and he meets her, and she had nothing to offer.

But God often brings us exactly what we need from the most unexpected of places, through unexpected means. This is part of God's economy – that if we are open and acknowledge our dependence on God, we will see God providing for us in ways we never imagined. Not in way we would have foreseen as part of our business plan, perhaps not even from people we would have accepted anything from. Elijah certainly didn't expect to be fed by ravens, or a poor Canaanite women. But our call is to openness - to letting go of what we think brings us security, and to grabbing on to what God sends our way.

In our economy, we are taught to look at those who are successful, that is, those who run profitable businesses, as models for how to do things. In God's economy, these

are not the people to emulate. God chooses those with the most sincere character, with the most generous hearts, with the most trust and dependence on God.

Businesses don't care about the motivation behind the money they receive. As long as people spend money and the bottom line goes up, they are happy. Jesus uses the story of the widow's gift to show that it is the motivation behind the gift that is most important to God. The widow's expression of total commitment to God is far more valuable than a generous gift which does little to change the lifestyle of an affluent giver. The widow gave her whole being to God. She knew the truth about who she was...totally dependent on God for everything. It is our truth as well. We come into the world with nothing, and we will leave with nothing. We are not owners of all our resources, we are stewards. And when we realize that in the end, it all belongs to God, then we realize our dependence on God as well.

For the widow, it is her faith and her gratitude that compels her to give, not the expectation of prestige or thanks, not concern for what others will think of her. Jesus wants us to be genuine and be giving of our whole selves, not for the sake of what others think of us, not for show, not for keeping up appearances. We are called to give, because we have been given grace upon grace. God's economy is not a trickle down economy – it is a shower down. We have been showered with good gifts.

God's economy may not always be practical, and may not always seem responsible. It calls us to move away from security in our own resources, and towards an openness and dependence on God. It does not look at the amount of what we give as much our motivation. God's blessings are showered down upon us, and our response is to give back generously. Because if our motivation comes from genuine gratitude for all we have been given, then we will give to God from the heart. And the more we give, the more we let go of what we think we need, the more we will see God's providence in our lives in the most unexpected ways. This is the God who generously gives us life, love and salvation, who generously gave up everything for our sake in the person of Jesus. Our only response can be to give back, genuinely, honestly and completely. In God's economy this is the bottom line.