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“All Good Gifts”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Dedication Sunday; Year B)

November 8, 2015

Ruth 3:1–5; 4:13–17; 1 Corinthians 12:4–12; Mark 12:38–44

Most of us have heard the story about the widow’s mite:

about the poor widow, the disposed woman without a penny to her name
who shows her true colors by lining up with the wealthy one percent
and contributing her two copper coins to the church treasury,
her 99 percent, perhaps as nobly as the rich.

Frankly, this story used to baffle me when I was a child
because I thought a mite was a little bug, like a dust mite
that infests our pillows and our mattresses and makes
them gain weight over time.

I didn’t realize that a mite could be anything small like a small bug,
a small coin, a little bit, a smidgen, a pinch,
or even a small box for collecting coins.

I just remember being impressed that even though this widow
had a problem with bugs, she was very generous with the church.

So, I guess the point of the story was not lost on me,
even with my childish understanding.

This Jesus story is about a widow, first and foremost,
a woman who has lost her significant other.

And what's interesting about widows in Jesus' day,
or even before in the time of the two Old Testament widows, Naomi and Ruth,
was that they were *in extremis*; in other words,
they lived frightfully close to the edge of possible demise.

Widows could have been wealthy, as were some of the patrons
and influential members of the earliest Christian Church.

But even if they were wealthy, they still were *in extremis* because their husbands,
their primary source of protection and identity, were dead.

While sons, other male relatives, or family wealth might provide them
a cushion of security, widows were traditionally considered
subjects of moral concern
because of their practically defenseless legal and financial vulnerability.

This is why Jesus lambasts the haughty scribes whom he claims
"devour widows' houses."

What he probably condemns here is their practice of appointing
some supposedly well reputed and devout *male*
to oversee the affairs of an already marginalized widow,
only to have that individual use her estate for his own benefit.

This widow who comes to the treasury, then, is not only disadvantaged
by poverty, but also by her vulnerable status, legally, religiously, politically,
and socially.

In contrast to the crowd of people who come and contribute large sums of money
which affects their welfare and well-being very little,
this poor widow, who lives in abject poverty, close to the point of starvation,
the Greek translation implies, comes and contributes
two small copper coins, worth no more than 1/8 of a cent each
to the treasury.

Her gift is greater than the others, Jesus' notes in lauding her,
because it is perhaps the only thing that protects her from total destitution.

She has sacrificed all, zeroed out her personal treasury,
and in doing so, has cast herself into a state of total
dependency upon God, in faith.

From this point forward, from whence will come her help?

She knows. Jesus knows. Jesus wants his disciples to know
it's a teachable moment for them and for us.

Mark Twain once voiced a witty twist upon the old adage *Don't put all*
your eggs in one basket.

Twain said, "Behold, the fool saith, 'Put not all thine eggs in one basket'—
which is a matter of saying, 'Scatter your money and your attention';
but the wise man saith, 'Pull all your eggs in the one basket and—
WATCH THAT BASKET.'"

(Mark Twain. *Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar*, Ch. 15)

This widow, contrary to conventional human wisdom that desires security,
wealth and status which weren't hers anyway, was foolishly free
to put all of her eggs in one basket, and then to wisely watch that basket.

Other people need to watch that basket, too!

There is a double-edged sword slicing through this story
that Jesus, while commending some things, condemns others.

Jesus certainly commends the widow's example of generous faith
and trusting surrender,

but at the same time, he condemns the church and religious leaders
who abuse the trust that people place in them,
who take advantage of the powerless,
who under the guise of piety amass their riches at great cost to others.

His is a cautionary tale to those of us who make a living "doing church"
and to those of you who take great pride in "being church."

WATCH THAT BASKET, lest we betray the trust of those entrusted to our care!

My husband's mother, my mother-in-law, was a widow ever since I knew her.
Her husband had died in 1973, just prior to my precipitous falling
in love with her son.

She wasn't poor in the same way that this widow in the Jesus story was poor,
but she was a widow living on a fixed income, out of which she
had to budget for her household, her medical expenses,
her car, and other necessities.

She lived on a pretty tight budget throughout most of her later life,
especially since she had been a child of the Great Depression and knew
well how to make every penny count.

We used to chuckle under our breath when we'd visit her home because
she had rubber bands hanging on the back of every doorknob
that she had saved from the newspapers
and aluminum foil that she pressed and straightened and reused
after repeated wrappings around baked potatoes.

Some of it didn't even look like shiny aluminum foil anymore; it was smoky
and blackened from repeated usage. But she insisted it not be wasted.

Nevertheless, she could afford to be a very generous person
because she scrimped in some ways to allow herself to be very generous
in other ways, especially when it came to her church.

And she loved her church!!!

Later in her years, she and my husband established a joint checking account
just to make sure that she was using her money judiciously.

I remember one incident particularly when she told us she wanted
to contribute \$400 to a church mission project that she totally endorsed.

This was in addition to her tithe, of course, about which she was adamant.

My husband agreed that it would be fine to make this extra, one-time contribution,
and she wrote the check and dropped it in the offering plate the next Sunday.

But when the bank statement came to us that next month,

my husband noticed that she had not written a check for \$400 to the church,
as they previously had discussed;
instead she had written a check for \$4,000 to the church for the mission project.
Hedge promptly called his mother and said very calmly and nicely,
“Mom, I notice in the bank statement that there was a check for \$4,000
to the church last month. Did you mean to do that?”
And she answered, “Oops, I guess I added an extra 0 by accident!
Oh well, they certainly need it, and if anyone can be trusted to use
my money wisely, I guess it’s the church. I’m happy to do that.”
And so we let it stand. We let that little extra 0 slip into her benevolence,
even though there is a huge difference between \$400 and \$4000,
especially for someone living on a fixed income.
But we thought it was so characteristic of her, so generous, so sweet,
so almost childlike and innocent, so unaware of any adverse consequences
that might impact her well-being, so unselfish,
so informed by her deep faith, and not by worldly concerns,
so possibly God’s hand at work through her
that we let it stand and never gave it a second thought.
But we did WATCH THAT BASKET, the church in which she put all of her trust,
to make sure that it was worthy of her implicit trust!

The whole time that I’ve been working on this sermon for today,
I have been humming to myself the beautiful song from the 1971
musical, *Godspell*, called “All Good Gifts.”
The words come from a German poem written in 1782 called
“We Plow the Fields and Scatter” by Matthias Claudius
that became one of the Thanksgiving/harvest hymns in many hymnals.
Godspell composer Stephen Schwartz chose to use the poetic words from the old hymn
and set them to new music for his modern age retelling of the Gospel story.
His song comes at the end of Act I, after Jesus has told his rag-tag company

many parables, clowned with them, and played charades with them.
Then Jesus gets serious after telling them the Parable of the Sower
from Matthew's Gospel about the seeds that fall on the rocky soil
or among thorns and produce nothing while those seeds that fall on good soil
blossom into an explosion of color like the recent pink bloom out
in the Atacama Desert in Chile, one of the driest places on earth.
At that point, the Jesus gang breaks into this song, "All Good Gifts,"
as they finally coalesce from a frolicking bunch of jovial chums
into a true community of love and caring.
"All Good Gifts" marks their transition from a rag-tag company
of many individuals to one body as disciples of Jesus.
The old Jesus freak in me has loved humming this to myself all week.
I hope if you know it, you'll sing along with our musicians
when they sing it following the sermon.
Maybe it will mark our transformation from many loving and caring individuals
to one loving and caring congregation, assembled here in the way of Jesus,
not to be served, but to serve.

First Presbyterian Church has been blessed with so many gifts, all good gifts,
for which we can be thankful to God.

There is much that is right and going well with our congregation,
even during this interim period.

We are blessed by a diverse congregation that loves one another
across lines of age, race, nationality, gender, ability, sexual orientation
or economic circumstance, as our welcome statement affirms.

We are supported by a great cloud of witnesses who, since 1871,
have practiced the faith on this corner of Roxboro and Main;
we celebrated that last Sunday for All Saints Sunday,
and we will celebrate that again this coming year as we commemorate
the 100th anniversary of our sanctuary in May 2016.

This next year we also celebrate the 100th anniversary of FPC's sanctuary organ,
(but not of our organist), and the beautiful music that enhances
our worship life here in this place.

We regularly honor the spiritual practices of worship, Holy Communion, Baptism,
prayer, study, and of intentional listening and invitational dialogue
as our faith authentically seeks understanding here.

We honor Holy Scripture as central to our life together: we listen well,
we are informed by God's Word, and we wear it during the week
as we clothe ourselves in compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness,
and patience.

We are hungry to be spiritually fed, and out of our hunger,
we feed the hungry who come to our door.

We care deeply about the good news of the Gospel, but we don't all
embody that care in the same way, and that's okay.

We are involved in a myriad of missions that show love and care
to the beloved community beyond these walls.

And we have some incredibly compassionate care teams in place
who are protecting the fragile in our midst
and keeping them vitally connected to the church.

We are taking in new members, even during this interim period,
to add to our numbers and to our energy, and baptizing babies,
children, and adults into the life of Christ's body.

Don't get me wrong, First Presbyterian Church is not perfect,
but we are perfectly dependent upon God and upon one another
and, out of our imperfection, we have compassion for the imperfect.
I would say we are a two-talent church. There is nothing exceptionally
special about us: we are not the largest congregation in Durham
nor the wealthiest nor the most involved in the community
nor the most benevolent.

But as the Jesus parable of the talents implies, the two-talented entity is rewarded exactly the same as the one which might be exceptionally special with all of God's gifts or with all good gifts, if you accidentally add an extra "o," sent down from heaven above.

In many ways, we are like the widow: poor, indeed, without God's grace and mercy, yet we are constantly being reformed and transformed from the inside out by God's steadfast love and grace.

So thank the Lord, thank the Lord, for all his love. Amen.