

“Growing Faith Through Partnership”
I Kings 17:8-16 Mark 12:38-44 Hebrews 9:24-28

INTRODUCTION TO I KINGS 17:8-16

James 1:27 says that pure religion before God is to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. In our story this morning from I Kings, the prophet Elijah cares for a widow and her sons and in so doing wound up being cared for as well. Hear the word of the Lord from I Kings 17:8-16.

INTRODUCTION TO MARK 12:38-44

There once was a very wealthy man who had never been known for his generosity to the church. The church was involved in a big financial program and the leaders of the church resolved to pay him a visit. When they met with the man one afternoon, they said that in view of his considerable resources they were sure that he would like to make a substantial contribution to this program.

"I see," he said, "so you have it all figured out have you? In the course of your investigation did you discover that I have a widowed mother who has no other means of support but me?"

"No," they responded, "We did not know that."

The man went on. "Did you know that I have a sister who was left by a drunken husband with five children and no means to provide for them?"

"No," they said, "We did not know that either."

"Well, did you know also that I have a brother who is a cripple due to an automobile accident and can never work another day to support his wife and family?"

Embarrassingly, they responded, "No sir, we did not know that either."

Well, he thundered triumphantly, "I've never given any of them a cent so why should I give anything to you?"

Our gospel lesson is centered around a widow as well. Jesus is teaching in the temple and he laments that there are religious leaders in his day who are not only NOT caring for widows and orphans but also are taking advantage of them, even to the point of taking away their homes and putting them on the street while at the same time, seeking admiration for themselves because they could offer long and lofty prayers. Then he puts them to shame by pointing out a widow. Would those of you who are able please stand for the reading of the gospel.

Let's pray. Thank you Lord for this vivid example of dedication and sacrificial giving. We are humbled by this story. We are inspired by this story. We are encouraged by this

story. As we meditate on its meaning to us this morning may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to You O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

This week I had the privilege of presenting a program to G.I.F.T. How many of you know about the G.I.F.T. program? It's a program sponsored by Crespo Jirrels Funeral Services. The G.I.F.T. stands for Gathering Informed Friends Together. Once a month Crespo Jirrels sponsors a luncheon on the first Thursday at the Golden Corral. It is a support group for widows and widowers who have used Crespo Jirrels for the funeral services for their loved ones. Their gathering is a gift, but getting to meet them and share with them was a gift to me. Clyde Casey invited me to share with them last November and it's always a gift when someone asks me to come again. It's a gift that keeps on giving.

The widow in our gospel lesson this morning is a great example of giving. In terms of the actual amount that she gave it was a mere pittance--less than one penny in today's money. But her generosity was evident in the fact that it represented all that she had.

Jesus had just been watching the religious folk in their giving practices. They were quite open about their giving. Indeed, they made a point that everyone knew what they gave and when they gave it. Some even paid trumpeters to announce that they were about to give.

It was in the light of this that Jesus pointed out this widow. Picture Jesus sitting with the leaders of the temple observing the people as they come in and watching their donations.

The donations were dropped in a long horn shaped metal receptacle. There was no such thing as paper money so it all makes a terrible noise as it rolled down this long horn shaped object and fell into the pool of coins--kind of like the noise that the coin changers at the H.E.B. makes when someone bring in a pickle jar full of coins.

When all the great amounts have been given along comes this poor widow. All she has are two small coins worth barely anything and drops them in. They barely make a noise. "tink tink." (drop 2 pennies in a glass vase) You can almost imagine the Temple leaders rolling their eyes. But then Jesus calls his disciples over and says, "This poor widow has put more in to the treasury than all the others."

The widow gave out of love for God. According to Jesus, she also received her reward.

The last time I received a debit card in the mail I still needed to do something. It had the potential to make the funds I have deposited in my bank account available to me, but it won't do so until I call 1-877-676-9740 and get the card activated.

Have any of you ever bought a cell phone? It may look great, brand new, shiny, sleek design, and have all the bells and whistles. But after purchasing it still won't work until it's activated.

In a few moments we will ask you to bring forward your pledge cards. But they're just pieces of paper, pledges of actions yet to take place given by pledgers who for the cards to have meaning will need to be activated.

I love the image we have been using this year by emphasizing our description of ourselves as "Presbees." We're all familiar with the phrase, "busy as a bee." If you go down to the Nature Center on Market Street you can see a hive in action...one that was started and kept going by our own Clarence Shepherd. The time I went there I was amazed at the non-stop activity in that slice of hive. We Presbees are busy bees. We've been activated.

I may preach about Stewardship once a year, but following through is a year round enterprise. Our Worship, our Fellowship, our Discipleship, our Stewardship and our Partnership involves a way of looking at life, a way of life, a lifestyle. It is a lifestyle of demonstrating our gratitude for all God's Gifts and how we can not only have faith, but have a GROWING FAITH. .

I loved the way one elder in a former church expressed it. He said, "I know God wants me to give, not because he needs the money but because of what it does for me. Just like a parent that wants his children to make the right decision for the right reasons, God wants me to be in a right relationship with him through me cheerfully giving my tithe." Have you ever noticed that in the bulletin every Sunday when it comes time to respond to God's word it says, "Presentation of our Tithes and Offerings?" Why does it say that? Aren't they the same thing? No they are not. The tithes are what is due to God. The offerings are what we give in excess of the tithe. The offerings are not what we give instead of the tithe. The tithe is the rent or the mortgage payment and the offerings are the home improvements.

When we pledge to give to support the mission and ministry of this church and to repay the loan that was taken to build this center for ministry and mission, we are growing our faith in partnership with one another and with other churches and ministries around the world and most importantly we are growing our faith in partnership with God.

God wants us to give not because God needs the money but because we need to let go of it! Guess what? When we do let go of it, when we give we are not only doing so in partnership with other believers, we are doing so in partnership with GOD! In giving we are promoted from working in the Mail Room to being a full partner in the Firm!

In his *Books & Culture* article "A Lot of Lattés," Ron Sider reviews *Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don't Give Away More Money*, a book "about the pitifully

small charitable donations of the richest Christians in history." Sider offers a synopsis of some of the authors' findings:

Twenty percent of American Christians (19 percent of Protestants; 28 percent of Catholics) give nothing to the church. Among Protestants, 10 percent of evangelicals, 28 percent of mainliners, 33 percent of fundamentalists, and 40 percent of liberal Protestants give nothing. The vast majority of American Christians give very little—the mean average is 2.9 percent. Only 12 percent of Protestants and 4 percent of Catholics tithe.

A small minority of American Christians give most of the total donated. Twenty percent of all Christians give 86.4 percent of the total. The most generous five percent give well over half (59.6 percent) of all contributions. But higher-income American Christians give less as a percentage of household income than poorer American Christians. In the course of the 20th century, as our personal disposable income quadrupled, the percentage donated by American Christians actually declined.

God has entrusted us with great resources and we are to be stewards of gifts. We are to be "executors" of God's will, if you will. God has given us so much and our responsibility is to make good use of what God has given us and to give back a portion of it to God's work and God's kingdom. Here's a question to consider. "If God gave you ten times what you give God could you live on it?"

It's impossible to receive when your hands are full. But when you let go of what you have, your hands are free to receive what God has to give next.

Giving money is an outgrowth of giving of ourselves. It is the inevitable result of the warmed heart. As we surrender ourselves to loving God and to loving our neighbor then we will want to give not only financial resources, but also we will want to give of our time in service to the church and the world. Have you ever noticed how your time follows your interests? You get interested in something and you invest your time in it.

If we give of ourselves, our money will follow. Jesus worded it this way: "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Show me your checkbook or your Discover bill and I'll discover what is important to you. Show me how much you give to the Kingdom of God and then compare that with how much you spend on your personal hobbies and I'll know what most important in your life.

I read about a large church that hired a church fund-raiser to direct its ambitious financial campaign. The fund-raiser proposed his strategy at the first planning session. He wanted the members to visit every home. He was met with immediate resistance. One cynic at the stewardship meeting cited that this church had a high percentage of retired people on fixed incomes. They could not be expected to pledge, the cynic argued.

The fund-raiser asked for permission to see in confidence the list of major givers. At the next meeting he told the stewardship work area that he had completed an analysis of the church's giving patterns. "Please note that the majority of your top 50 contributors are 'widows on fixed incomes.' Please note that, according to my calculations, those 'widows on fixed incomes' pay about 60 percent of this congregation's annual budget. I'd say if you want to improve the giving in this congregation, you need to talk to those women first, find out why they give, then try to infect the rest of the congregation with the faith of these 'widows on fixed incomes.'"²

We don't have a big horn shaped metal receptacle, but we do have a nice quiet basket. We won't blow any trumpets, but this morning, when it is time to present our tithes and offerings, rather than pass offering plates I invite you to be like that widow. I invite you to bring your tithes, your offerings, your pledge cards forward and place them in the basket in front of the communion table. Please come down the center aisle like we do for communion and return to your seat by the outer aisle.

Dr. James I. McCord, then president emeritus of Princeton University Theological School, once told the story of a man who commented that he was never coming back to a particular church because all they ever talked about in that church was give, give, give. Dr. McCord concluded, I cannot think of a better definition of Christianity than that: give, give, give. I am convinced that unless you learn to give you can never learn to be fully human.

The apostle Peter said it well when he wrote in his closing words of this first letter. He wrote, "God's gifts of grace come in many forms. Each of you has received a gift in order to serve others. You should use it faithfully." I Peter 4:10

May God give us the motivation to pledge, and the activation to follow through on that pledge to give back a portion of what we have been given and to put to good use God's gifts so we can have a Growing Faith through partnership.

Let's pray. Dear Lord, Every breath we take is a gift. Every step we take is a gift. As we stand to bring forward our tithes, our offerings and our pledges for this next year may we do so reverently, joyfully, and in great anticipation of what we will watch unfold as a result. What a holy moment! What a privilege. What an honor it is to know you are counting on us. We have received freely from you and so we will give freely.

We thank you for the gift of life and this week on Tuesday we will gather to give thanks for the gift of Elaine McMichael's life. We pray for others of our church family who are ill. We pray for Malcolm Murray, for Marge Nance, for Ann Reilly's sister who had back surgery, for Sandra Floyd who had a procedure to alleviate pain in her back. And we pray for young Heidi Martin who is suffering from Rheumatic fever.

Veteran's Day Recognition

On our national Mall now sits 7 acres of bronze, granite, and gardens that memorializes the greatest generation, those who fought and died in WWII. There are 56 tall pillars that encircle the memorial stand for the states, and districts, territories of our country.. Here are some statistics about WWII. From 1940 to 1945

Total service members: 16,112,566 soldiers, sailors, air force, and marines
Battle deaths: 291,557 Other deaths in service: 113,842 Non-mortal wounding: 671,846

If there is any question as to why this period of time was so important: Worldwide 50,000,000 people died as a result of the war.

What is stunning to me is that so many of these veterans are still alive. It gives you an understanding of how young they were then. But it wasn't only the soldiers who put forth an effort during that time, there was participation by all citizens of the United States: 60% of the vegetables grown at that time were grown in back yards and rooftops.

Of course there have been conflicts since and we are grateful for those who have served and even now are serving. This morning we honor all those who have served their country and I would ask that those of you who served if you would stand, if you are able, and come forward and share your name, rank and branch of service and allow me the honor of praying for you.

Let's Pray. Dear Lord, Today we honor our veterans, worthy men and women who gave their best when they were called upon to serve and protect their country. We pray that you will bless them, Lord, for their unselfish service in the continual struggle to preserve our freedoms, our safety, and our country's heritage, for all of us. Bless them abundantly for the hardships they faced, for the sacrifices they made for their many different contributions to America's victories over tyranny and oppression. We respect them, we thank them, we honor them, we are proud of them, and we pray that you will watch over these special people and bless them with peace and happiness. In Jesus' name we pray; Amen.