

### *Abundance*

A number of years ago, I was sitting at my desk agonizing over the annual so-called “Stewardship Sermon.” I say I was agonizing, not because I didn’t believe in the good work of the church I served, or because I had any misgivings over the generosity of the congregation, but because I had sat through enough dreadful sermons on stewardship in my life to consider that term a dirty word. I didn’t want to add one sermon to the pile. Thinking to be helpful, the treasurer of the congregation quipped, “Oh don’t worry about it, their minds are already made up. Besides, there are no erasers on pew pencils.”

You know, that’s true? The little golf pencils that some churches use in their pew racks don’t generally have erasers. I looked in our pews here at First Church, and I see we are particularly confident and have provided ballpoint pens for our usage.

But I looked my treasurer in the eye and levelly said, “Well, maybe they can’t erase their pledge... but they can still add zeroes.”

Ministers have a certain number of jocular anecdotes that we use to prime the pump, so to speak. The story is told that when Jean Milner, the longstanding pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis, was asked by the session of the church to address stewardship in his Sunday sermons, he climbed into the pulpit, addressed the congregation and said, “The session has asked me to speak to you about money. I consider the matter handled.”

And of course, generations of ministers have informed their congregations, “I have good news and bad news. The good news is that we have all the money we need to run the church. The bad news is that it is still in your bank accounts.”

You’re going to hear those jokes again, by the way.

But truthfully, as institutions that survive on donations go, the Church has, through the years, done rather well. In my experience, it is because members *want* to be generous. Folks want to know how the money is spent, I suspect, because they have given enough to *care* how it is spent. So much have I found this to be the case that I decided probably about ten years ago to stop preaching stewardship sermons on stewardship Sundays. The way I see it, if we do our job as a congregation talking plainly about what God does for us and what God wants from us, by the time we actually ask you to sit down and make a deliberate practice of declaring your giving for the year to come, you’re already equipped. All that is left is to engage in the faith practice of giving.

So, imagine my chagrin when the text of the day today is that one commonly called “The Widow’s Mite.” You know how it goes, the widow drops the dead-level last bit she has in the plate and Jesus praises her.

I've always been profoundly uncomfortable with this text. Probably because I *am* aware of situations where slick fundraising apparatuses prey on the elderly and the poor. I *far* prefer the texts for the day from Ruth.

Ruth is such a lovely story... let's concentrate on Ruth instead. The way this goes down is that Naomi moves with her husband Elimelech to Moab. And for a Jewish audience at the time of Jesus, this story has already gone significantly off the rails with the move to Moab. Moving to Moab isn't something you do if you have other options. You only go across the border to Moab if what is behind you is scarier than what is in front of you. So, they go across the border into Moab and there is a little foreshadowing in the introduction when we learn that Naomi's two sons are named *Mahlon and Chilion*. These names mean *weak* and *sickly*. It's sort of the opposite of naming your sons Thor and Magnus, or "Walker and Texas Ranger."

Anyhow, *Weak* and *Sickly* find themselves Moabite wives, which is Just. About. The. Worst. Thing. they could have done in the eyes of their family back home, and before the first paragraph break, all three men are dead. Naomi is flat-busted in Moab and she has two daughters-in-law and no grandsons.

This is not good. This is also the point where we begin to realize that the book of Ruth is not G-rated, because we encounter our first reference to the Hebrew practice of Levirate Marriage. Put simply, it's all about the men. If a man died childless, his male next of kin was supposed to ensure that his widow had offspring in his name. It didn't really matter if his brother or cousin was already married, or even remotely attracted to the widow or she to him. It's what was done so that the memory of the man would live on in his son, and then the dead man would have an heir to inherit his property. The only benefit the widow really got was to have a son to care for her in her old age.

Naomi's husband and her two sons died, and she was stranded in a foreign land without family, so it's no exaggeration to say she's flat busted in Moab.

Knowing there was no male next of kin to marry her daughters in law and make sure they had offspring, Naomi attempts to release them. "Go back to your mother's house," she says.

There is more to that statement than meets the eye. It's not "Go back to your father's house..." Their fathers have already done for them all they were going to do. Whatever dowry would be paid has already been paid. Their fathers aren't, probably because they can't afford to, going to make another set of marital arrangements for their daughters. There's no more status to be had. That's why she tells them to go back to their mothers' houses. There they might at least get a meal in exchange for mucking out the stables. It's better than the other profession they might have to enter.

Naomi is ready to take off for home and her daughter in law Orpah resigns herself to her fate and goes home to her mother. But Ruth says no. She'll take her chances on Naomi. She'll head back to Israel as foreign woman and let the chips fall where they may. I guess what was in front of her was less scary than what was behind her.

When they get back to Israel, Ruth has to earn a living, so she goes gleaning. There's a rule in the Bible that says the rich people can't keep everything they get. It's in Leviticus, the 23<sup>rd</sup>

chapter. So, Ruth goes out to the fields of a rich man named Boaz. One interpreter says, “He was long in the tooth, but he still knew a pretty girl when he saw one.”<sup>1</sup> Boaz tells the harvesters not to treat Ruth badly, which of course is code-language for not treating her like she was in the other profession. Boaz puts more grain in her basket. When she asks why he is treating her so generously, he just says he’s heard how she’s taking care of Naomi.

Ruth might be oblivious to what is really going on, but Naomi is decidedly not. At the end of the harvest when the wheat was to be threshed and much merriment was to take place, Naomi tells Ruth to wear her *good* clothes...

This is the point in the story where the solo saxophone starts playing. As Frederick Buechner puts it, “Ruth followed her mother-in-law’s advice to the letter and it worked like a charm. Boaz was so overwhelmed that she’d pay attention to an old crock like him when there were so many young bucks running around in tight-fitting jeans that he fell for her hook, line, and sinker.”<sup>2</sup>

To make a short story even shorter, after Boaz’s lawyers get Elimilech’s will through probate, the way is clear for Ruth and Boaz to get married.

And they lived happily ever after.

It’s only in the last lines of Ruth that we see why a story that is at the very least a little seamy at the edges is such an important part of the Bible. Ruth and Boaz have a son, Obed. Naomi comes to live with them and serves as Obed’s nurse. And we usually go racing past the most important line in the book; we rush to the bit where Obed is the father of Jesse, and Jesse is the father of David, and of course Ruth is the great-grandmother of the greatest king of Israel. But that’s not the most important bit, is it? There are plenty of stories about David in the Bible, why bother including a tell-all biography of his great-grandmother? No, I think the most important bit is this line, “Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him.”

Inherent in those words is the acknowledgment that not one blessing comes into our lives which God does not make to happen for us and for our benefits... Naomi was flat-busted and without a reason for hope in the world. Praise God from whom all blessings flow, indeed.

Of course, that’s something David knew also.

He knew about abundance, and where who it comes from.

That’s the sort of life of gratitude that underpins the story of the widow and her coins.

In her book Help, Thanks, Wow, The Three Essential Prayers, Anne Lamott writes, “Father Gregory Boyle, the Jesuit who founded Homeboy Industries, a program that helps former gang members reenter society reminds us that gratitude is not about waving your arms in praise on Christian TV shows. That’s what we think God would want because we would *love* to have a few hundred people applauding us, waving their arms like palm fronds. Instead, God’s idea of a

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, Peculiar Treasures. (Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1979) P148

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 149

good time is to see us picking up litter. God must love to see us serving food at the soup kitchen at Glide Memorial Church, or hear us calling our meth-head cousin just to check in because no one else in the family speaks to him. He can be long-winded and a handful, but we used to put each other's peas in the glasses of root beer at holiday dinners, so we have history together. With two other cousins, we took naps together in one big bed, so we pick up the two-hundred-pound phone and dial his number, and say, 'How are you?'

I really believe God's idea of a good time is also to see us sharing what we have worked so hard to have, or to see us flirting with the old guy in line at the health food store, telling him our grandfather had a hat just like his, even though it is a lie."<sup>3</sup>

What we're talking about is a life of authentic gratitude. The story of the widow and her two coins, in the context of Mark's Gospel, stands in contrast to the rest of the twelfth chapter of Mark, where Jesus is being challenged by Pharisees and Scribes. They've quizzed him on money and taxes, and they've tried to back him into a corner on the Law and which commandment is the greatest. They've been sparring verbally around the practices of faith, and along comes this widow, this poor widow, and she exhibits the kind of trust in God that Jesus has been preaching about.

The scribes and the Pharisees knew exactly – exactly - how much they were required to give. There was a long history of it. That's in Leviticus also - and Numbers, and Deuteronomy too. According to the Law, the history of giving, she could have kept one of the coins. It still would have been generosity without measure, to give half of one's living.

But that's not the point. Lamar Williamson writes, "The woman's action is praiseworthy because out of her poverty and without reservation she gave her whole living to God. But more is meant here. Her gift foreshadows the one that Jesus is about to make: his very life. In Mark, this poor widow becomes of type of him who, "though he was rich, yet for our sake became poor so that by his poverty, we might become rich."<sup>4</sup>

All of life, every bit of it, every scrap and all abundance, is a gift from God.

That's why these aren't so much stewardship texts, these stories from Ruth, and Mark. These aren't stories about money, or the lack of it. These are stories about faith. These are stories about how God is always redeeming, even when we can only see at the end of the story. They're stories of how you and I can break out of the ordinary and predictable, and perhaps even timeworn practices of our lives to find new meaning, new refreshment for our faith.

And so they are fundamentally stories about gratitude.

God is always working for goodness, for mercy, for kindness, for love. In grateful response, let us do likewise.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*. (Riverhead, New York, 2012) pp58-59

<sup>4</sup> Lamar Williamson, *Mark* in *Interpretation*. Mays, Miller, and Achtemeier, eds. (JKP, Louisville, 1983) p234