

Proper 27B – November 8, 2015
Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17; Psalm 127; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

The Widow's Mite

Jesus seems to turn everything upside down as he bucks a very popular attitude found, for example, in the book of Deuteronomyⁱ and present in his day *and* in ours, namely that physical and material well-being are signs of God's blessings upon particular people. Being rich, full, happy and well respected was considered to be blessed by God; and conversely, being poor, hungry, sorrowful and rejected were considered to be God's punishments and curses for some earlier misdeeds. In his Sermon on the Mount—or Plain, depending whether you're reading Matthew's or Luke's gospel—Jesus bucks this perspective in his opening remarks which we call the Beatitudes, by completely reversing this popular notion of blessings and woes. Here he repudiates not only the notion that the poor and downtrodden deserve their unfortunate state; he also repudiates the linkage between God's blessings and those who are full and seem to have it all.

But having done this, Jesus is not simply overturning the whole order of things and now blessing the poor because of their poverty and cursing the rich because of their wealth. He is not doing that. Instead, he has a more comprehensive message that affects everyone equally though not in exactly the same way. He is calling each and everyone to whom he gives a blessing or a woe to look at where their sense of blessedness—their sense of self-worth or value—really lies. To those who have little or nothing left to lose, he says, “Blessed are you,” hoping that they might more readily see their sense of self-worth, their blessedness, their God-given belovedness, rooted in God's unconditional love. And to those who are wealthy, full, well-respected, his statements of “Woe to you...” express not a judgment against wealth and social respectability in themselves; but rather, he is expressing the same hope that these people will not wrap their sense of self-worth and value, their sense of blessedness and belovedness, around the pursuit of wealth, fullness, happiness and respectability, but rather on God in whom lies their deepest sense of meaning and worth, no matter what their circumstances.ⁱⁱ

We are in the season focused on the stewardship of our time and talents and treasures in service to Christ and His Church. This is not so easy a subject, especially the money part. For many the discussion of money is surrounded by as many taboos and proprieties as was the subject of sex in Victorian society. We haven't made a whole lot of progress since 1844 when Ralph Waldo Emerson observed, “Money...is hardly spoken of in parlors without apology.” In an interesting article written by James Knight, Professor of Psychiatry at Tulane University School of Medicine, he states, “Patients show far less resistance in relating hatred for their parents or in disclosing sexual perversities than in discussing their money status or transactions. It is as if they equated money with their inmost being.”ⁱⁱⁱ Money is imbued with a lot of meaning economically, psychically and spiritually.^{iv} Though, money was not *the* issue in general for Jesus, as I stated a few weeks ago. In the New Testament record, money and possessions in themselves are seen as neither bad nor good—it all depends on the use made of them as well as motives, beliefs and the actions

or inactions of their owners, as well as how they were obtained. Great possessions are seen as a danger but not a sin. At times, as in today's gospel account, Jesus spoke much about the perils and possibilities of wealth, but at other times it seemed trivial to him. He did stress in several ways that the meaning of our lives and our true security do not come from the money we earn or the assets we build, or the stuff we accumulate, or from the privilege and prestige we obtain. Rather, according to Jesus, material wealth is made meaningful only by what we do with it. Contrary to the popular belief that riches were a sign of God's blessing and favor, wealth, to Jesus, derives any merit or demerit from the service or disservice that such wealth renders. In other words, does it serve God's Kingdom, God's purposes of justice and compassion? Does it serve the common good or just one's own? Is it used in the most effective way of stewardship, or further self-indulgence? According to Jesus, money is a lot like the rest of our lives—what you give away is finally what you keep; and where a person's treasure is, there also is their heart. And there never seems to be enough for ourselves, until we start sharing. Paradoxical, *and true*.^v

Yet, so often, our very concern for a happy life makes us unhappy, anxious; though all the while we claim to be just on the point of attaining happiness. Even when we have all that we not only need but desire, our anxieties of death, loneliness, meaninglessness, and condemnation can still make our lives unbearable. We are very good at preparing to live, but not very good at living. We know how to sacrifice many years for a diploma, and we are willing to work very hard to get and keep a good job, a house and car and other assets and items. But we sometimes have difficulty remembering that we are alive right now, which is the only moment there is for us to be alive. Or, as Frederick Buechner put it, “[The biggest problem of wealth Jesus observed is that] there are people who use up their entire lives making money so they can enjoy the lives they have entirely used up.”^{vi} Thus whether we are well-off or poor, or somewhere in the middle, we must see that money is a good servant, but a poor master.^{vii}

That reminds me of the Responsible Wealth Project. Responsible Wealth is a national network of businesspeople, investors and affluent Americans who are concerned about deepening economic inequality and are working for widespread prosperity. With people such as Bill Gates and Warren Buffett involved, this network of several thousand wealthy entrepreneurs and heirs are advocating for a more fair distribution of wealth through three primary ways (beyond their foundations' work), namely, through corporate responsibility, promotion of family-sustaining living wages, and tax fairness through the preservation – not elimination - of wealth taxes including income, capital gains and estate taxes. These members of the Responsible Wealth Project are inspiring generosity instead of greed, and responsibility instead of selfishness as they neither hoard nor waste their surplus, but rather, put it in motion—in service to others—thus helping improve the lives of millions.^{viii}

Regrettably, in this gospel scene we read today, Jesus observed and commented on the excess pride and self-satisfaction of certain other well-to-do persons who had no intention of concealing their generosity which, in fact, made no dent in their wealth anyway. Contrasted with this is the discretion and humility of a poor widow Jesus sees who drops two small coins into the offering plate, drawing from her own want.^{ix}

Of the two offerings Jesus observed at the Temple treasury, which does he prefer? Already in the time of Jesus there was a rabbinic teaching that stated, “Two turtle-doves offered by a poor person are worth more than a thousand sacrifices of King Agrippa.” Jesus confirms this. The poor widow in essence gave more of her very self because she gave in greater proportion of her resources. In fact, she would have to go without anything. And the way she gave in discretion and humility was more in keeping with the values of the Kingdom of God Jesus was talking about. Jesus himself was to give everything he had and was, for all of us. To paraphrase the prayer written by William Penn, since what we have and who we are are gifts of God; what God has given us, God does not lose in giving. And so, what we give back to God and to others in our time, attention, material gifts, we have not lost by our giving. For what is ours is God’s, and what is God’s is ours, if we are God’s.^x And like the loaves and fishes, there never seems to be enough even for ourselves until we start sharing. And it is only our lives given away for love’s sake that makes life really worth living. The widow and Jesus knew this. What do we know?

We know that Jesus also spoke of, and lived as if God’s creation is one of abundance, that there is plenty to give and share. It seems so simple, and yet we make it so difficult. We live in a world where the gap between scarcity and abundance grows wider every day. Whether at the level of nations or neighborhoods, this widening gap between rich and poor is polarizing people, making each camp more and more suspicious and antagonistic toward the other. But the peculiar and ironic thing is that the ones with the abundance more or less rely on an ideology of scarcity, while many suffering from scarcity often rely on an ideology of abundance, like the poor widow in our gospel. How can that be?^{xi} Is there enough to go around—enough money, food, water, shelter, space? An ideology of scarcity says no, there’s not enough, so hold on to what you have. In fact, don’t just hold onto it; put aside more than you need, so that if you do need it, it will be there, even if others must do without. An affirmation of abundance says the opposite: appearances notwithstanding, there is enough to go around, so long as each of us takes only what we need: if we are willing to have but not hoard, there will even be more than enough left over. This understanding has us look first at the abundance and scarcity we each carry within ourselves, and then the fullness and emptiness of our parish family and the wealth and poverty of our global—and nearby—community. Building bridges across each of these extends our identity as givers.^{xii}

Yet ultimately, this isn’t about money; this is about our faith and what we can leave behind for those who follow us. It’s about overcoming our resistance to discovering ourselves as givers. Simply put, we are created to give and we live in a world in which there is always something to give. In Genesis (1:27) we read that God created us, male and female, *in God’s own image*. Thus we are a reflection of God. We reflect God’s creativity. We reflect God’s love. We reflect God’s generosity. It’s in our very being. We are created to be creative and loving and responsible and caring, and we are also created to be generous. It’s who we really are and were made to be. And so as we live and give of ourselves we discover fulfillment in truly being ourselves. There is a felt balance about it. We live; we give, as givers to God’s glory. So, today, in this week before our Stewardship Ingathering

may I remind us all: go ahead—act. Be generous. Let us become fully the givers we are and are meant to be.^{xiii} Amen.

ⁱ Deuteronomy 28:1-14.

ⁱⁱ As Frederick Buechner describes, the great opportunity of being well-off is that

“Since you can solve with your checkbook virtually all of the practical problems that bedevil ordinary people, you are left in your leisure with nothing but the great human problems to contend with: [such as] how to be happy, how to love and be loved, how to find meaning and purpose in your life, [how to be of service to others and how to be in right relationship with God]. [However,] in desperation [some well-to-do people and lots of less well-off people as well] are continually tempted to believe that they can solve these [great human] problems too with their checkbooks [and credit cards], which is presumably what led Jesus to remark one day that for a rich [person] to get to Heaven is about as easy as for [a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, or in modern imagery, for a Rolls Royce] to get through a revolving door” (Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking (London: Collins, 1973), p. 81).

Jesus said that, knowing that it is not that a few well-off people are so wicked that they are kept out of the Kingdom of God, but that some are so out of touch with reality, that they cannot see that God’s Kingdom is a place worth getting into. See also Frederick Buechner, Whistling in the Dark (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) p. 81.

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted in Herb Goldberg and Robert Lewis, Money Madness: The Psychology of Saving, Spending, Loving, and Hating Money (Gretna, LA: Wellness Institute, 1978), p. 32

^{iv} As one observer writes:

“Money is currency, from the Latin *currere*, ‘to run’ or ‘to flow,’ evoking liquid assets, circulation and commerce, from the simplest acts of bartering to the most sophisticated versions of buying and selling, lending and borrowing, profit and loss [saving and spending]...for many [around the world] the dollar bill is emblematic of America the embodiment of capitalism, high finance, big spending, rags-to-riches opportunity and unimaginable wealth...Money evokes psyche’s currency, in the form of libidinal values coined in multifarious images...telling us where energy is invested, accumulating or frozen, where there is wealth or impoverishment, depression or inflation, hoarding or bankruptcy...But whether or not we are able to avail ourselves of such treasure depends in part on the...the ways desire and fear direct our tendencies [to seek and] to save, spend or squander.” (From “Money” in The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism, Ami Ronnberg and Kathleen Martin, eds., The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images (Cologne, Germany: TASCHEN, 2010), p. 524).

^v You know, as paradoxes go, the more you think about money the less you understand it. As Buechner puts it,

“The paper it’s printed on isn’t worth a red cent. There was a time you could take it to the bank and get gold or silver for it, but all you’d get now would be a blank stare. If the government declared that the leaves of trees were money so there would be enough for everybody, money would be worthless. It has worth only if there is not enough for everybody. It has worth only because the government declares it has worth and because people trust the government in that one particular although in every other particular they wouldn’t trust it around the corner. The value of money, like stocks and bonds, goes up and down for reasons not even the experts can explain and at moments nobody can predict, so you can be a millionaire one moment and a pauper the next without lifting a finger. Great fortunes can be made and lost completely on paper. There is more concrete reality in a baby’s throwing its rattle out of the crib. (Buechner, Whistling in the Dark, *Ibid.*, p. 80).

“No rest after success” is the way a New York Times article put it, about millionaires who just aren’t satisfied. “A few million just doesn’t go as far as it used to” – said one anxious multi-millionaire who was interviewed (Gary Rivlin, “In Silicon Valley, Millionaires Who Don’t Feel Rich” in *The New York Times*, August 5, 2007, p. 1).

^{vi} Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark*, *Ibid.*, p. 80.

^{vii} Now I’m really not here to take jabs at the “1%,” or even the “0.1%” whose ever increasing share of wealth is at Gilded Age levels, and now include finance capital speculators/hedge fund managers—few of whom are serving the common good through job creation or other productive work, and who are paying proportionally fewer taxes than the “99%,” but rather, are merely getting richer off their riches. (See Paul Krugman, “Now That’s Rich” in *The New York Times*, May 9, 2014, p. A27. See also Nicholas Kristof, “It’s Now the Canadian Dream” in *The New York Times*, May 15, 2014; Eduardo Porter, “The Politics of Income Inequality” in *The New York Times*, May 14, 2014).

^{viii} My father-in-law lived to be nearly 102 years old. He grew up in an era when names like Carnegie, Vanderbilt, Rockefeller, Frick and Ford were synonymous with great wealth, while at the end of his life, names like Gates and Buffett were every bit as impressive. He recalled being asked around age nine what he wanted to be when he grew up. As he sat on the porch of their modest home in the rural coal mining district near Blaine, Kentucky, he simply replied that he wanted to be a philanthropist—that sounded pretty good!

^{ix} ...just as in an earlier time the widow of Zarephath did when she gave with faith to the prophet Elijah the little that remained to her to live on, as recounted in our lesson from 1st Kings.

^x And as we are God’s as creatures of God, and as we live and give in God’s love—we can give without loving, but we cannot love without giving.

^{xi} As Jesus encountered in his day, there still prevails in ours a social vision that glorifies those who create wealth in monetary terms (even if it’s just for themselves and their family - and yes, who give some of it away), but treats “failures”—i.e., the poor, with varying degrees of scorn or disdain/blame. This social vision has given place of honor not to those who labor daily for often little salary or wages, but rather to those who reach great amounts of wealth and excess of luxury and fame.^{xi} Such a social vision that fails to see that money is only a part of wealth makes the false assumption that only the wealthy create wealth. So, those who work hard, and help their neighbors, community, nation and planet, often for low wages, are not considered as wealth creators in this prevailing social vision. And certainly those who are deprived through unemployment or underemployment, along with the young, homemakers and stay-at-home parents, the physically and mentally challenged, retirees and other seniors, are not seen as wealth creators, either. Yet many such people contribute to the quality of life—to the common-wealth as it used to be called—with their personal responsibility and commitments, family stability, hard work and community participation. As a result, this prevailing vision assigns our government a two-faced role: first, use the carrot of tax cuts, bail outs and subsidy incentives for those who are perceived as wealth creators on the assumption that they need encouragement; and second, use the stick of denying the same incentives to the working poor and unemployed, on the assumption that desperation will inculcate responsibility.

^{xii} God’s arithmetic regarding wealth and responsibility takes into account much more than the dollar amounts: “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance: but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.” A final and related truth is that it is God’s world in which we live and move and have our being. What we have is not our own but God’s. St. Paul taught the church in Corinth, “You are not your own...you were bought with a price” (1 Cor. 6:19-20). The psalmist proclaimed, “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof” (Ps. 24:1). We belong to God. Although we are seduced into believing that things belong to us, we are only trustees of jobs, homes, cars, children, families, our bodies, and material possessions for a brief time. The truth is that everything we think we own is really owned by God. God entrusts us with life and talents and resources. Therefore, what we give to others is from God’s own treasury we have been given on loan to manage. None of us are such curmudgeons that we don’t feel

gratitude for gifts, and a great day, and family—at least some of the time. And we know, in our heart of hearts, that a most profound and sustainable gratitude is owed to God for creating us to be generous, giving us the wherewithal to be generous to the best of our circumstances, and relieving us of the anxiety of letting go of our “stuff” by reminding us that it is all simply on loan.

As Walter Brownridge put it,

“(To quote Martin Marty,) the highest form of idolatry is the self-made man who worships his Creator. A Christian understanding is that all that we have (our life, our freedom, our gifts, our talents and whatever measure of wealth we attain) is from the Grace of a Generous God. Thus, we are called to respond to God’s love as a gift of grace. This grace requires us to live each day in gratitude for God’s grace and with a spirit that calls us to be generous to God and others with our time, our talent and our treasure. Our call is to put money and possessions into a right relationship with God.” See Walter Brownridge, “Blessed to Be a Blessing” (www.episcopalchurch.org part of 2012 Stewardship Reflection Series).

^{xiii} In this context, I want to shift gears slightly to mention a form of resistance which I acknowledge in myself and see in many others, namely, the resistance to discovering ourselves as givers. Last Sunday we acknowledged all the faithful souls who have planted generous seeds that continue to bear fruit in our time. We give special thanks for their gifts that have been bestowed upon this community of faith. Over time many people have remembered this parish in their wills, and left bequests—small and large—in support of the ministries of this parish. If it were not for the legacy of these faithful parishioners of the past, this parish in this place would not be able to exist today. These givers in their generations intended to ensure the life of this community for future generations. We are the spiritual descendants of all those who have given their blood, sweat, and tears, along with their resources—in good times and in bad—to worship and serve God and our neighbors in this city, in this part of God’s world.

This space has been blessed by baptisms and confirmations, weddings and funerals. It has held the prayers of countless Sundays and weekday services. People have celebrated birth and life in this sanctuary, and people have grieved death and loss in this sacred space. The place where you are seated holds the spirits of all those who have sat here in generations past, and you are blessed by the prayers they have left behind. We in this parish have been blessed by our spiritual ancestors. Indeed we stand upon their shoulders. But with that blessing also comes our responsibility to those who follow after us. As another preacher put it, “Remember, you are the spiritual ancestors of future generations of the faithful who will call this parish their home.” (Ted Vorhees, *Spiritual Ancestors of Future Generations* (Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts, 2009)).