**“False Start”**

Mark 12:38-44

Right here in the middle of football season, you may be tempted to throw a yellow flag. What’s the penalty? False start. Now if you are not football savvy, “false start” is when an offensive player gets in a hurry and starts before the center hikes the football. So, why am I guilty of a false start? Well, this is only the First Sunday of Stewardship Season and already I’m preaching about money. Dedication Sunday is three weeks away, and here I am preaching a Stewardship Sermon. “False Start,” you say. “Somebody, throw a yellow flag.”

If that’s what you’re thinking, then you’re assuming that the story of “The Widow’s Mite” is the perfect text for Stewardship Season. It’s the perfect passage of scripture to raise money to pay the bills and keep the institutional church running. After all, that was the role of the temple treasury in Jesus’ day. The rich and the poor brought their money to the temple treasury and presented their offerings, and this money was used to keep the religious apparatus of the day running—in other words, to pay the bills.

By this line of thinking, this morning’s story teaches us a very important lesson about stewardship. Jesus once said, “From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.” (Lk 12:48b) The widow gave out of her poverty a small amount, but a huge percentage of her income. The rich, those to whom much had been given, gave large sums out of their wealth, but as a percentage of their income, it was only a small amount. Therefore, according to this line of thinking, this is the perfect text to teach proportional giving. Your pledge, your offering to the church, should be a percentage of your income. And *this* is the way, according to good Christian Stewardship, that everyone pays their fair share.

Well, that is a good Biblically healthy understanding of Stewardship. Our giving to God should be based on a percentage of our income, and in many places in the Bible, we hear 10% lifted up as a goal. But there’s a problem in using this text to teach that lesson. Anybody know what the problem is? What percentage of her income does the widow give? The story says she “put in everything she had.” All of it! 100%.

If that is the stewardship lesson taught by this text, then right about now I see yall reaching for those yellow flags again. “Unsportsmanlike conduct,” you say. “That’s not fair. After all, if we give everything to God, we won’t have anything left to live on. How will we survive?” And you know what? You’re right. That’s not fair, and ultimately I don’t think Jesus is saying that poor widows ought to give everything they have to the temple or to the church. Jesus himself points out the injustice of what’s happening: “[She] put in all she had to live on.”

“But, but, but, but, but….,” says the Stewardship Apologist. “What Jesus literally says in this story is, ‘She gave the whole of her life.’” That’s the literal translation of “She gave everything she had.” Refusing to let go of this story as the classic Stewardship Sunday scripture passage, the Stewardship Apologist points out that Stewardship is about remembering that everything belongs to God. Even after we give our pledge to God, what we have left over still belongs to God and should be used in ways that glorify God. Psalm 24 proclaims, “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the [whole] world and [everyone] who live in it.” “So, see, this is a good text for a stewardship sermon,” says the Stewardship Apologist.

Yes, that too is a good stewardship lesson. Everything does belong to God. But that’s still not the lesson of this story. The widow didn’t have anything left to spend toward the glory of God. The point of this story is: “she had nothing left to live on.” She gave everything.“ So what is going on here? What is Jesus saying?

To understand this story, you need to go back to the beginning of the reading. There Jesus says, “Beware of the scribes.” The scribes were part of the leadership in running the temple, and the scribes Jesus warned us about were kind of in it for their own glory and self-gratification. And here’s the key verse. “They devour widow’s houses.” For the sake of maintaining the institution and keeping up their standard of living, they guilted poor widows into giving all that they had to the treasury. One of the fundamental principles of the Judeo-Christian faith is protecting and providing for widows. But the institutional temple was devouring them.

Right about now, our Stewardship Committee is probably reaching for their yellow flag. “Illegal procedure, preacher; you’re undermining our whole stewardship season here!”

Well, I can’t help it. The more I study this story the more I’ve come to understand this is a lousy story for raising money to preserve the institutional church. You see, when we continue reading in Mark’s Gospel, the very next thing Jesus says is the institutional temple is doomed for destruction. “Not one stone [of the temple] will be left upon the other,” says Jesus. And about 40 years later, that’s exactly what happened. Rome came to suppress a Jewish rebellion, and the temple was totally destroyed. This poor widow gave all she had, the whole of her life, for an institution that was doomed for destruction.

Please understand; I’m not just picking on the institutional temple, because I believe Jesus is also talking to the institutional church. In this part of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus is saying, “The days are numbered for religious institutions that only exist for their own well-being.”

My goodness, surely a statement like that deserves a yellow flag—personal foul. Why, that interpretation ought to get me thrown right out of the game. But I do believe that’s what Jesus is saying. So where does that leave us? Where’s the Good News in our story?

Well, if you stop and think about it, the widow’s story is sort of a foreshadowing of what Jesus is about to do. The widow gave “the whole of her life” for a corrupt and condemned temple. And Jesus gave the whole of his life for a bunch of sinners, sinners like you and me.

So what’s the message for the institutional church today? Well, in the story, Jesus calls for his disciples—he calls for you and me— to give the whole of our life for those he plans to redeem.

Folks, no church is perfect; I’m sure we can all agree on that. But in reality every church is far from perfect because every church in *this* world is made up of imperfect sinners, sinners like you and me. But here I am asking you to give the whole of your life to this fallible church—so that God can make us better.

In defining the mission and purpose of the Christian church, our Book of Church Order declares: “The Church is to be a community of hope, rejoicing in the sure and certain knowledge that, in Christ, God is making a new creation. This new creation is a new beginning for human life and for all things. The Church lives in the present [the imperfect present] on the strength of that promised new creation.”

“And what,” you may ask, “is the nature of this new creation?”

Well, the Book of Church Order continues: “The Church is to be a community of love, where sin is forgiven, reconciliation is accomplished, and the dividing walls of hostility are torn down. The Church is to be a community of witness, pointing beyond itself through word and work to the good news of God’s transforming grace in Christ Jesus its Lord.” (Book of Order F-1.0301)

Rather than embracing a mission of perpetuating the never-ending existence of an irrelevant institution, our Book of Church Order really drives the point home: “The Church is to be a community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone, *even at the risk of losing its life*.”

My friends, our Stewardship Theme this year is: “Together We Can; Together God Will.” If we all come together and we all make a financial pledge to support the mission and ministry of this church, then maybe those who can least afford it won’t be guilted into giving more than their porportional share. From those to whom much has been given, much is expected, but almost all of us can afford to give something. We *all* need to give our proportional share. I promise you, if we all come together and support this church, God will provide more than enough.

As I mentioned in our November newsletter, 94% of you marked in our congregational survey “this church has made a difference in my spiritual life,” and 97% of you stated “Members [of this church] help each other out in times of trouble.” In my time as your Interim, I’ve seen that this church has a strong commitment to outreach ministries for those in need here in our community, and with our recent adoption of an Afghan Refugee family, this church is making a difference in our world. In the words of our Book of Order, we are “pointing beyond [our]self through word and work to the good news of God’s transforming grace in Christ Jesus [our] Lord.”

In our vision planning small group meetings, I heard you say you want this church to grow (using those words from our Book of Order) as “a community of love, where sin is forgiven, reconciliation is accomplished, and the dividing walls of hostility are torn down.” And that’s basically what you will hear in the Vision Planning Team’s Report which is soon to be presented to you, the congregation.

My friends, we are not an irrelevant institution. In Jesus Christ, we are becoming a New Creation. “Together we can, Together God will.” So let us all come together, all of us making a proportional pledge of our income, and together financially support God’s vision for God’s church.

Let us pray:

Lord, keep us—keep your church—always focused on the world outside the walls of this building. And remind us always that you called us together, not for our own comfort and gratification, but for your glory alone, and for the furtherance of your Kingdom. Amen.

David A. Cagle

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