

“GETTING IN LINE”
Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
November 18, 2018

PLEDGE SUNDAY

Hebrews 12:1-2

Mark 12:38-44

If you were here in worship last week, you will remember that I wasn't. I was so bummed. I really wanted to be here, not just because I really love being with you, but because I liked the sermon I had written and felt really good about it. That's not always the case, by the way! There's many a morning when I stand up here before I preach and silently pray to God to take the sermon I have offered and make it enough.

But last week wasn't one of those days. I was confident in the sermon and what I was going to say, and then, alas, it wasn't meant to be. Let me say, though, before I proceed, that Susan Starrett sure did it justice, didn't she? I watched the video and she nailed it!

At any rate, while I was sad to not be here last week, and to not preach that sermon, I would have been even more sad not to be here today – not because this sermon will turn out to be anything spectacular necessarily, but because this is the day we give to God our financial pledges for next year. This is the day we show God our intention to partner with him to do some amazing work in the world in the coming days! This, in my opinion, is one of the most joyous days in the Christian year.

We have the opportunity today to say thank you to the God who has given us everything we have, and to say “I'm going to give this in the year ahead, partnering with you, that lives may be touched, and hearts may be opened, and life made better for so many people.” It's a wonderful, wonderful day!

Well, check that. Let me say instead that it can be. It can be a wonderful day depending on how we approach it. What do I mean by that? Well, let's go back to this morning's Gospel lesson. Remember what was happening? Jesus was in the temple watching as it was time for the offerings to be given. He watched as the people brought their money forward. He watched as those who were rich gave, apparently, in a fashion where everyone could see and be impressed. Jesus knew, and they knew, that though they gave a lot, it wasn't sacrificial, rather, it was showy.

But then came this widow – all alone, obviously in need herself, and it's not hard to imagine that hardly anyone but Jesus was paying attention to her. So it was that Jesus saw that she reached into her pocket and gave everything she had – every single thing she had.

And he knew that despite all outward appearances, that woman was the one whose heart overflowed with joy that day. Because she gave with abandon and trust to the God who had given all to her.

That woman did it right. She kept things in perspective. As one pastor put it so aptly, “her attachment to her possessions was not as strong as her gratitude to God.” (On-line, David G. Benner, “The Spirituality of Stewardship,” 5//24/11)

Oh friends, that's the crux of the matter. In this world that tempts us to focus so on our possessions, possessions that (by the way) the world says to think of as solely our own, our faith invites us to think otherwise. To remember that all that we have are gifts from God, that we are trustees of those gifts, meant to use them in partnership with him for ourselves and others.

Sometimes it takes us a while to come to that place where we understand that, but sometimes it doesn't. I read a story this week about a little boy named Ryan being raised by a single mother. Belinda. They had trouble making ends meet, but Belinda worked hard and did her best to provide for them. One night, as was their normal routine, she sat next to Ryan on the bed reading him a goodnight story.

At some point, he interrupted her and asked if she had bought that book for him. “Why, yes, I did,” she replied.

He then said, “Well, did you buy this bed too?”

“Yes.”

“Did you buy this house?”

“Yes, Ryan, I did.”

“Well, Mom, how about the new sweater you just got me for the cold weather?”

“Yes, Ryan, I bought that for you too.”

She said it was as if something suddenly dawned on him, and then he said, “Mommy, get my piggy bank. There are seven pennies in there. Take them out and buy something for you.” (Douglas Mullins, “Parking on Someone Else’s Nickel,” *First Fruits*, p. 98)

That little child understood what all of us are meant to understand, something that widow in the temple certainly did – that God has given us everything we have, and out of gratitude, we have the opportunity to give back to him.

And when we do, we become partners with him, in changing our world and in changing lives. And, I would suggest, we stop thinking of ourselves as just receivers of God’s gifts, but now givers as well, thinking not so much “how much can I keep for me?” but “how much can I give to God?”

Bishop Robert Schnase tells about a man whose grandchild was being baptized in a church service one morning, along with some other babies. After the service, the families were gathered up near the front to take pictures, and one young mother was struggling to hold her baby and grab something out of the diaper bag at the same time – so this grandfather came to her rescue and offered to hold her baby for her. Well, while he was holding the baby, several times, people came up to him, looked down at the baby, and said, “Oh, your granddaughter is so beautiful!” Quickly, he corrected them. “Oh, this isn’t mine. I’m just holding him for a minute.”

The very next morning, Schnase says, this grandfather, a long-time member of the church, showed up in the pastor’s office at the church, and asked to speak to him. He sat down, looked at the pastor, and said, “I want to change my will to include the church and I want to talk to you about how to do that.” The pastor had known this man for a long time, and this had never come up, so he was kind of taken aback, and asked the man what had brought him to this decision – at which point, the older man’s eyes filled with tears, and he said, “Yesterday I realized something when I was holding that other baby. I kept telling people that wasn’t my child, but then it dawned on me that the baby was part of my family, part of my church family, and I have a responsibility for that little boy just like I have for my own granddaughter. I’ve been a member of this church for over forty years, and in God’s eyes I’m a grandfather for more than just my own. I’ve taken care of my own children with my will, but I realized I also needed to provide for the children of the church. So I want to divide my estate to leave a part to the church as if the church were one of my children.” (Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, “The Practice of Extravagant Generosity,” p. 140)

Oh friends, how our hearts open up when we realize the great good we can do when we give, with joy, back to God out of what he has given so abundantly to us.

My dear friends, you and I are where we are in this place today, because others gave with joy and abandon before us. They saw what they had as gifts from God and they gave back in abundance to him.

We're here because two sisters – Martha Ellis and Jane Torbert – in the 1850's gave the great gift of this piece of land upon which our church is built. And we're here because countless others gave of the gifts God had given them – just take a look at some of these stained glass windows to see who they were.

But you don't need to just do that, you know about people whose giving has made a difference in your life and faith. It might have been a Sunday School teacher – I'll always, always, always, remember people like Virginia Biles and Doris Bryan, who taught me here in this place about God and God's love for me.

It might have been a choir director, or a pastor, a Scout leader or a youth leader. All of them gave of the gifts God gave to them, and God used their gifts to touch our lives and our world.

Today, as we prepare to give the pledge of our gifts to God, we're getting in line with them – all of them. As we heard from Hebrews this morning, "we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses." We get in line with that great cloud of witnesses today, to say to God, "Here we are, and here are our gifts. Use them as you will. Use us as you will."

I pray that, in a few moments, when you come forward to present your pledge at the altar, that it will be a time of joy for you. I pray that even as you lay it down on the rail, you'll feel a thrill of excitement wondering just how God will use what you're giving in the lives of others.

Maybe like that grandfather, as you kneel there in prayer, you'll see a child learning "The Lord's Prayer" for the very first time; a youth kneeling to be confirmed; a hungry person being fed; a person going on their very first mission trip – all made possible because you and others here are giving with joy to the God who has given to you.

It's a blessing for me to be getting in line with you today to make our pledges to God for the year ahead. Having seen what God has done with our gifts in the past, we can only imagine what God will yet do in the year ahead! Embrace the joy of this moment, my friends! Come, as we sing this hymn now, and lay your pledge before the Lord!

