

GIVING OUT OF YOUR POVERTY

Luke 20:45 – 21:4
Celebration of Life and Ministry Service

June 5, 2015
Fargo, ND

Grace and peace to you from God, our Creator, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave his all for the sake of the world.

This evening we gather to acknowledge, celebrate and honor an entire spectrum of ministry of those whom God has called to serve His people within the Dakotas Conference.

We gather to remember, with deepest respect and honor, those who have preceded us in attaining glory. We remember and celebrate the saints who are the pioneers of our faith. They bear witness that even in death our hope is in Christ Jesus. I welcome the families and friends of these we mourn, and extend to each of you my deepest sympathy. We come together in grief, in various stages of healing, acknowledging our human loss. May God grant us grace, that in pain we might find comfort; in sorrow hope; in death resurrection.

We also gather tonight to celebrate the remarkable service of the 2015 retirement class. Your witness and work have set a standard for all of us. We are grateful to God for each of your ministries and your faithful discipleship. I share the sentiments Paul expressed to the Thessalonians when he wrote “I always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in my prayers, constantly

remembering before God our Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. “ (I Thessalonians 1:2-3) This class has contributed over 172 years of service to Christ and The United Methodist Church. I invite this great gathering of the Dakotas Conference to join me in expressing our admiration and gratitude to you and your families.

Finally, we gather this evening to embrace and celebrate those who come to be credentialed as licensed local pastors, commissioned as provisional deacons and elders, and ordained as full member deacons and elders. It is a holy privilege to credential, commission or ordain each of you to Christ’s ministry. Again, Paul’s words to the Thessalonians express my sentiments at this moment. “It is clear to me, friends, that God not only loves you very much but also has put his hand on you for something special. When the message of the Gospel came to you, it wasn’t just words. Something happened in you. The Holy Spirit put steel into your convictions.” (I Thessalonians 1:4-5a) The Church, assembled here this evening, joins me in thanking God for each of you saying “Yes” to God’s call!

Please pray with me. Almighty and gracious God, send your Holy Spirit to anoint this Celebration of Life and Ministry. Revive in us the memories of loved ones who are a source of hope to us. Revive in us the power of your resurrection promise in our lives. Grant to those who are retiring the joy of rest and renewal. Grant to those who come to be credentialed, ordained and commissioned the assurance and authority of your abiding presence. Grant to those here this evening who may yet be discerning your call, the clarity and conviction of a heart strangely warmed. Revive in all of us the courage to do no harm, to do good and to grow in loving

relationship with You and our neighbors. And now, open our hearts and minds and souls by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may hear with expectation, wonder and joy your Word for us on this sacred occasion. We offer our prayers in the precious name of Christ Jesus. Amen.

In the gospel reading from Luke, Jesus is teaching in the temple. Jesus is condemning the scribes – the religious lawyers – for walking around in long robes, drawing attention to themselves, seeking the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets, stealing the homes of widows through deceit, and saying long prayers for the sake of appearance.

So here I am this evening, walking around in a long robe, with the best seat in this auditorium and saying long prayers. Did anyone else make this obvious connection or am I just extremely self-conscious? I should be self-conscious, along with every other clergy person sitting here tonight in a long robe. Jesus was clearly denouncing the religious leaders and exposing two potential dangers in the quest for righteousness. First, doing good out of ulterior motives. And second, doing wrong with the privilege accorded to those appointed to do good. Ouch. Jesus can be so brutal!

After thoroughly denouncing the scribes, the gospel says that Jesus looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the offering plates. He also saw a poor widow, perhaps one of the very widows cheated out of her home by a dishonest scribe, put two small copper coins into the offering. The poor widow's two copper coins were worth one-sixtieth (1/60) of a daily wage at that time. Then Jesus

makes this observation, “Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has given more than the rich people, for they have contributed out of their abundance, but she gave out of her poverty and has put in all she had to live on.” (Luke 21:3-4) Once again, Jesus turns upside down the value systems of the world. The poor widow’s offering and Jesus’ teaching confronts us with some very penetrating and disconcerting questions about our spirituality, about our stewardship, about our discipleship, about our righteousness: “Are we poor enough to be generous?” “Are we poor enough to be in ministry with ...”

- Are we poor enough to give extravagantly what we can’t afford?
- Are we poor enough to give our all?
- Are we poor enough to build relationships with those who live in poverty?
- Are we poor enough to put ourselves at risk for the sake of others?
- Are we poor enough to feel the pain of the world?
- Are we poor enough to respond to the God who loves the least of these?
- Are we poor enough to love as God loves?
- Are we poor enough to truly make disciples of Jesus and transform the world?
- Are we poor enough to be passionate about bringing persons to Christ?
- Are we poor enough?

Some years ago, I led a Volunteer in Mission team to Nigeria. At one of the worship services we attended in Jalingo, the pastor led a passionate, fervent prayer prior to the offering. He prayed that God would lead the people to see

their offering as an expression of faithfulness, discipleship and love for God. In the congregation sat a desperately poor woman, dressed in dirty, tattered clothes with nothing to give. When the offering plate came to her, she held it and looked at it for a moment. Then she slowly rose from her seat and stepped into the aisle. Quietly, gracefully she placed the plate on the floor. Then, in a humble and beautiful act of devotion, she simply stepped into the plate. Out of her poverty, because of her poverty, in spite of her poverty, she offered her entire life to God.

On the surface, our gospel lesson this evening appears to be one of Jesus' numerous teachings about money. But it is really a story about complete humility and devotion; complete surrender and dependence on God. Jesus is not primarily interested in how much you give, but in why you give. Jesus is ultimately interested in your heart. Jesus is not interested in you contributing out of your abundance. Jesus is interested in you giving out of your poverty – out of a sense of complete and total selflessness and devotion to God. This story is not about giving money to God. It is about giving ourselves – our total being – to God. It is about giving up power, position, prestige, possessions, and becoming “poor enough” to follow the way of Jesus.

Bishop Rueben Job, whose life and faithful witness we remember and honor this evening, made this observation in his classic little book, *Three Simple Rules: A Wesley Way of Living*:

To abandon the ways of the world for the way of Jesus is a radical step.

While this step is very simple and easily understood, it is not easily

achieved. We realize it may lead us where we do not wish to go. Are we really ready to give up political power for the power of God's love? Are we ready to give up our most cherished possession – the certainty that we are right and others wrong? Can we trust God enough to follow the ways of the Spirit rather than the ways of the world? If we choose to follow this way, will we be seen as weak and at the mercy of others rather than as powerful and in control of every situation? If we choose this way, will our position be eroded and our point lost? The risk seems so great and often our fears speak so much louder than our faith. (pages 26-27)

As many of you know, Rueben was a dear friend, mentor, and spiritual father to me. The most important thing he taught me, among countless truths, is this: giving one's total being to God is the central issue of the spiritual pilgrimage. Let me say that again for the benefit of those who will be commissioned and ordained this evening: giving one's total being to God is the central issue of the spiritual pilgrimage. I am confident our retirees can attest to the reality that faithfulness is a life-long journey of decision, after daily decision, to open oneself to God's will and presence. There is no greater struggle in our effort to walk with God. Even Jesus approached the conclusion of his earthly journey wrestling at Gethsemane with giving his total being to God. Because of the tremendous value our culture places on money and possessions, our financial giving becomes one of our Gethsemanes where we wrestle with and ultimately express the degree to which we are willing to give ourselves to God. Like the scribes and rich people of Jesus' time, I tend to give what I can spare of my life. Am I alone here?

Bishop Christian Alsted of the Nordic and Baltic Area delivered a powerful sermon on ministry with the poor at a recent Council of Bishops meeting in which he made the penetrating observation that “only those who have nothing to lose are really able to follow Jesus. Those who have nothing to lose are...dependent enough to really want to follow him.”

The poor widow did not have much money to give to God. Yet, she gave all that she had to live on. In giving the very resources that could keep her alive, the widow, in effect, offered her very life to God. She risked everything; she became completely vulnerable; she had nothing to lose; she placed her very life in the hands of God. Jesus made a special point of this with his disciples. And Jesus invites us to give all that we have – our total being – to God. This is the poverty of heart, the poverty of attitude, the poverty of obedience, the poverty of Spirit which Jesus desires for each of us to have. Remember what Jesus said: “Blessed are you who are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” (Luke 6:20)

Candidates for ordination and commissioning, what is the state of your heart and spirit as you prepare to kneel and receive the anointing of the Holy Spirit? Are you poor enough, empty enough, open enough that you can be totally available to God, totally available to God’s purposes, totally available to God’s people?

One day an old man showed up at my office at Grace UMC in Logan Square on the near north side of Chicago. I was serving there as a part-time associate pastor while in seminary at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. Opening my office door a few inches, I could see his eyes were glassy, his clothes shabby and dirty,

and his furrowed face glistened with silver stubble. He clutched a wicker basket holding a few unappealing vegetables he wanted to sell me. I was uneasy enough that I made a quick purchase to alleviate both my pity and my fear. To my chagrin, he returned the next week, introducing himself as Mr. Roth, and told me he lived in a one-room apartment a few blocks from the church. As my fear subsided, I got close enough to realize it wasn't alcohol but cataracts that made his eyes look like marbles. On subsequent visits, he would shuffle in, wearing two mismatched right shoes, and pull out a harmonica. With glazed eyes set on a future glory, he'd puff out old gospel tunes between conversations about vegetables and religion.

On one visit, he exclaimed, "The Lord is so good! I came out of my apartment this morning and found a bag full of shoes and clothing by my door." "That's wonderful, Mr. Roth," I said. "I am happy for you." "You know what's even more wonderful?" he asked. "Just yesterday I met some people who could really use them." Mr. Roth gave me an important lesson in Christian discipleship that day. He taught me what it means to give out of one's poverty. Don't you desire such a heart – a heart free enough, poor enough, empty enough, open enough, hopeful enough to make room for others, to be joyfully generous, joyfully extravagant? Perhaps Jesus taught his followers that we will always have the poor with us so that we will always have the poor to teach us, to show us the gospel, to evangelize us.

Jesus uses one criterion – one standard – and one criterion alone in determining the merits of our discipleship. As Jesus observed and reflected on the actions of the scribes and the poor widow, he used one criterion and one standard alone in

determining the merits of their discipleship. Did their gifts reflect they were placing their very lives in the hands of God? This is the only criterion Jesus is seeking. Ministry candidates, take note of the poor widow as you come this evening.

- Jesus is seeking your complete trust in him, not your self-reliance.
- Jesus is seeking your self-less devotion, not your achievements.
- Jesus is seeking your heart, not what you can spare of your life.
- Jesus is seeking your love of peace and justice, not your credentials.

Come today; come to this altar and offer God your heart, your total being. Come and empty your heart that you might be poor enough to risk it all for the reign of God. Then, and only then, will you be unleashed to make God's vision your everyday mission. May it be so! Thanks be to God!

Bishop Bruce R. Ough

Dakotas-Minnesota Area