

“Identity Check: Who We Are As United Methodists”
“V - Giving And Serving”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
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Stewardship Sunday

Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17

Mark 12:38-44

What do you do when you get in an elevator? You ever watch people get in an elevator? It's pretty interesting. Some just shuffle in, find the closest spot in which to stand, turn around, face forward and wait for the doors to close. Others go right to the panel, hit the button of the floor they want, ask others coming on what floor they want, and wait for the doors to close. Still others, get in, look around, say hello to people already in the elevator, and maybe even engage in conversation with something like “how do you like this heat?” or “how about those Phillies?”

Well, I have a friend who does something interesting when he gets in elevators. He looks at people's eyes. Why? Well, he says he can tell all about them by their eyes. In fact, he can tell if that person is a giving person from their eyes. There's something about them - there's a joy that comes through the way they look at the world.

I don't doubt him. I understand what he means. It's not just in elevators, but you can generally tell by looking at a person if they're a giving person. You can tell it in the way they carry themselves, in the sense of peace and contentment they possess, in the joy they radiate.

You know who else was good at seeing the heart of people? Jesus. He could spot a happy, content person a mile way. Likewise, He was very good at noticing those who were unhappy or putting on a good act.

Jesus saw both that day in the temple, that day we heard about in this morning's Gospel lesson. Actually, He had about had His fill of people putting on a good act already. Right before the passage that we heard read this morning, Jesus had been in conversation with some of the religious leaders, and they were about as far away from being joyous and giving and peaceful as you could find. In fact, it was obvious they were all about legalism and looking out for number one, and in fact, trying to trip up Jesus.

They questioned Jesus on all manner of things. They wanted to know what it

took to be a faithful person - literally, *exactly* what it took. They didn't want to mistakenly give more than they had to. They questioned him about giving to the emperor, and which commandments were most important, and how certain laws about such things as marriage could be interpreted. Behind all of their questions was pure self-interest and self-absorption. And *they* were the supposed religious ones.

Now, Jesus is in the temple and it's time for the offering, and up go those self-righteous religious leaders, throwing in their extremely generous offerings. And don't you know, they did it with flair - so that they could be seen by others in the temple!

Then along came this widow - quiet, unassuming, simple. She laid down everything she had - two coins, and turned and walked away, probably hoping no one noticed her. But someone did - Jesus - and what He noticed was her heart.

Of all people who had every right to give a meager offering, it was that woman. Of all who had every right to be extra cautious since she was on her own, it was that woman. And yet she gave her all - and Jesus noticed it.

Don't you sometimes wonder about her? I mean, think about what it takes to give your all to the Lord. All you have. What made her do it?

You know, I thought of something new this week. I wonder if that woman knew about Ruth and Naomi. She could, you know. For those Hebrew scriptures were the scriptures she would have read. Those would have been her stories of faith, the ones she grew up on, just like we grew up on the stories of Jesus. So maybe she knew about Ruth and Naomi, and maybe, as a widow like they were, she clung to their story.

Do you remember their story? Naomi was Ruth's mother-in-law, and in the space of just a short period of time, Naomi's husband died, Ruth's husband died (who, of course, was Naomi's son), and Naomi's other son died (who was married to Orpah). All of a sudden, they were three widows completely on their own with nowhere to turn. Naomi encouraged both of her daughters-in-law to return to their own families in their own lands. Orpah went, Ruth didn't. In that beautiful passage that we've heard so many times, Ruth says to Naomi, "Entreat me not to leave, or to return from following thee, for whither thou goest I will go, and whither thou lodgest, I will lodge. Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God."

Even so, even though Ruth pledged loyalty to Naomi, Naomi was bitter and anxious. But God, in His infinite wisdom made a way for them by way of a man named Boaz. He brought Boaz into their lives, and Ruth became his wife, and they

took in Naomi, and all was well.

It's a wonderful story of God making a way when there didn't seem to be a way; of God healing hurting hearts; of God providing. So maybe that widow in the temple remembered that in her suffering and loneliness. Maybe she counted on that and trusted in that same God to make a way for her. So she went to the temple and gave Him everything she had.

And Jesus saw it, and lifted her up as an example for giving.

We don't know a lot about that woman, we don't even know her name. But there are a few things we can surmise about her, and I think those things will help guide us in our giving and guide us particularly today as we come to God's altar to make our financial pledges and our service pledges for 2010.

The first thing is that she loved the Lord. Plain and simple. She loved the Lord and was grateful for all that she had. She didn't have much admittedly, but she was grateful for what she did have. She was a widow, but surely she was grateful that she had known the love of her husband for as long as she did. She was poor, but she was rich in other things - like life and health. She was able to get up and walk to the temple. This woman wasn't feeling sorry for herself for what she didn't have, rather she was grateful for what she had - grateful to God. She loved Him for all that she had. They were gifts from God. And so all she could do was give back to God what He had first given to her. She gave first because she loved the Lord.

When Melinda and Sandy and I were out in Kansas City recently for that continuing education event, we heard the pastor, Adam Hamilton, tell the most amazing story from his own life. One summer, he and his wife and their two daughters went on a camping trip to Yellowstone and the Grand Tetons. It was around his birthday and that's what he wanted to do for his birthday - spend it camping with his family. So they drove their pop-up camper out there, got set up, and then went and did some hiking and sightseeing.

Hamilton and his wife had decided to give each of the daughters \$20 to spend on the trip. They were each given \$20 and it had to last the whole trip, but alas, on the very first day, one of his daughters wanted to buy something. They were in the national park store, and she had spied a baseball cap with the park logo on it. She just had to have it!

Well, Adam pleaded with her not to spend the money right then. It cost \$20 so she would blow the whole thing on that cap. He tried to get her to wait by telling her that they would be visiting lots of cool stores in Jackson Hole and she could find

great stuff there, but no matter what he said, she could not be dissuaded from spending her money, so she plunked down her \$20 bill on the very first day and bought the cap.

That night, the family gathered around a campfire to watch the sun go down and the stars come up, and there sat his daughter, proudly wearing that cap. She looked over at him, face beaming. "Dad, what do you think of my cap? Isn't it great? Don't you love it?" "Yes," he replied. "It's great. I do love it." "Good," she said, "it's for you. Happy birthday!"

That child took everything she had and spent it on her father, for one reason and one reason only - she loved him. The same reason the widow gave her all in the temple. She gave because she loved the Lord.

A second reason she gave was because she trusted the Lord. She trusted that He would make a way for her. She trusted that she would have what she needed, somehow. Perhaps it was the story of Ruth and Naomi, perhaps it was the fact that God got her through the death of her husband. She trusted Him enough to give Him everything she had, to empty herself for Him.

This might be the place where we come up short. Oh, we love the Lord and we know that we have comes from Him. And we want to be a part of His work in the world, which I'll talk about in a minute. But it's this trust thing that gets us. We're so used to calculating just what we need, and planning for future needs, and making sure that we're covered before we give anything. We tend to trust ourselves more than we trust God, and it keeps us from giving the way we could give.

Again, an example from Adam Hamilton. Picture yourself having ten apples in front of you - ten apples which represent everything God has given you. Nine of them are red apples, one is golden. According to Biblical standards, God asks that you give a tithe, one tenth to Him - which, of course, in this case, is the one golden apple. Hamilton says that we get that. We understand what is expected of us. Trouble is that we start to look at that tenth, that golden apple, and we start whittling away at what we offer God. We rationalize that we need some of that for our own needs - a car, a bigger house, a better vacation - any number of things, and we whittle away at what we offer God until it's nowhere near a tenth of what we have.

In the end, it's a matter of trust. That widow trusted God, trusted that even though she was giving 100%, God would give her what she needed. How much do you trust God?

Finally, that widow gave her money in the temple so that God's work could be

done. She became a partner with God in transforming lives. Likely, she had seen it already with her own eyes. Likely, she had seen what Jesus had done for and with people. Perhaps she had seen those men from all walks of life, fishermen and such, transformed into being His disciples. Maybe she had seen Jesus heal the blind, or cause the lame to walk. Maybe she had heard about the adulterous woman being saved when Jesus challenged those without sin to cast the first stone at her. Maybe she knew Zaccheus and saw his life turned totally around.

And she wanted to be a part of it. She wanted to be a partner with the Lord - so she gave what she had.

How about you? You have the opportunity to be a partner with Christ in transforming lives. If you've been around this church anytime at all, you've seen what Christ is doing in this place. You've seen transformed lives.

In fact, I asked a number of people this week how they've seen that in this church. Someone mentioned Vacation Bible School, and the fact that children, especially those whose families don't come regularly to church, learn the stories of Jesus in exciting, creative ways - ways they will not forget. I told that person that, to this day, I cannot read the passage about the paralyzed man whose friends lowered him down through the roof so Jesus could heal him, without thinking about the day years and years ago, when I, in VBS, made a little shoe box version of that story. It stays with you - and those stories help transform lives.

Someone else talked about our youth taking the time, several times a year, to host parties for the children of parents involved in the Domestic Violence program. These youth could be hanging out with their friends, going to the mall or the movies, or doing any number of other things, but instead they have been transformed by the love of Christ to share their love with others.

Someone else talked about the tremendous love and support they feel in their study group - like Beginnings and Sunday School and Disciple, while others spoke about their UMW circle doing the same thing. Transformed lives sharing the love of Christ in wonderful ways.

And there's so much more - like singing your faith in choir, and calling those who can't come to church anymore through Telecare, or holding one another up through the prayer chain.

The Lord is doing tremendous things through the people and ministries of this church!

Perhaps one of the most moving things I heard recently was what one little

girl said after coming to worship here. She said, “ I feel like I took a little piece of Jesus home with me.” What more could we give to a child than that? Knowing that Jesus goes with her?

The Lord is doing wonderful things here, and through your giving, of your time, your talents, and your treasures, you can be a partner with Him in transforming lives.

So do you love Him? Do you trust Him? And do you want to be a partner with Him? Those are the three things that guided that widow on that day long ago, and those are the questions for each of us to consider today.

Let me close with something Bishop Robert Schnase has said:

“Every sanctuary and chapel in which we have worshiped, every church organ that has lifted our spirits, every pew where we have sat, every communion rail where we have knelt, every hymnal from which we have sung, every praise band that has touched our hearts, every church classroom where we have gathered with our friends, every church kitchen that has prepared our meals, every church van that has taken us to camp, every church camp cabin where we have slept - all are the fruit of someone’s extravagant generosity. We have been the recipients of grace upon grace. We are the heirs, the beneficiaries of those who came before us who were touched by the generosity of Christ enough to give graciously so that we could experience the truth of Christ for ourselves. We owe the same to generations to come.” (*Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, Robert Schnase, p. 116)

From the time our denomination began, until this very day, we United Methodists have been known for the generous giving of our time, our talents and our treasures. So may you and I, in the year to come, indeed, give graciously with glad and generous hearts, so that others can experience the truth of Christ for themselves, and know the peace and joy that passes understanding. May it be so.

Amen.