

“Debt-free”
Faithful Stewards of God’s Infinite Grace (1 Peter 4:10)
2 Kings 4:1-7
November 8, 2015
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

The story is told about a priest, who “asked one of his parishioners to serve as financial chairman of his parish. The man, manager of a grain elevator, agreed on two conditions: no report would be due for a year, and no one would ask any questions during the year. At the end of the year he made his report. He had paid off the church debt of \$200,000. He had redecorated the church. He had sent money to missions. He had \$5,000 in the bank. Needless to say, everyone wanted to know how. The man quietly explained, ‘You people bring your grain to my elevator. As you did business with me, I simply withheld 10 percent and gave it to the church. You never missed it.’” (David E. Leininger)

I wouldn’t recommend this approach, but it’s one way to encourage people to tithe!

David Leininger comments on the fact that preachers:

“...are intimidated by dealing with a topic -- [stewardship] -- in which we are perceived to have a vested interest...I do not want people to think that; and the easiest way to avoid it is to avoid the subject as much as possible.

“Of course,” Leininger continues, “faithful preaching will not allow avoiding the subject of money. Fully one-third of Jesus' parables had to do with money and possessions -- that would be one sermon in three -- and that was in a society that was much less money-oriented than ours. If Jesus' emphasis was that strong, what should a faithful preacher's be? And whether he or she likes it or not!”

I. Empty Vessels.

The Old Testament also emphasizes material faithfulness to God's work.

In today's reading from 2 Kings God bestows abundant gifts on a widow in distress. God gives to us extravagantly and abundantly. This is the basis for our grateful response.

Like the empty jars in the story, we come to God spiritually empty, spiritually in need. And God fills each of us with his Spirit. When we gather as a community to worship and to pray, we pour out upon one another the blessings of the Spirit which God has entrusted to us. As we share our faith with one another, it grows in strength and power through the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit, just as the widow's oil miraculously multiplies through her faith in God and through Elisha's faith.

The more we let go of a focus on ourselves; the more faith we have in God; the more our eyes are opened to God's abundance and the more gratitude we have in our hearts.

Over time, we learn to live with the understanding that all we have belongs to God. We care for it a little while, but ultimately everything in all of creation belongs to God.

Diane Gibbons writes a beautiful poem about God's abundant goodness to us. It goes like this:

I can say nothing of God, except
that I saw the red flames of a
cardinal against the snow this
morning as I drank tea.

I can say nothing of God, except
that the warm smell of potato soup
and the sharp tang of cheddar cheese
shimmied up my nose when a friend
made lunch for me.

I can say nothing of God, except
that in the afternoon I washed my
face in a cold mountain stream,
and it stung my skin and left me feeling
fresh and clean.

I can say nothing of God, except
that two nights ago a cricket
sang a funny song in my closet
amidst the socks and silence.

I can say nothing of God, except
that stones can speak,
and deer fly in my dreams,
that a strange child smiled at me
in the supermarket,
and that each blade of green grass
wears a locket with God's face inside,
and that on every hair on my cat's face
is written "Alleluia!"

I can say nothing of God, except
that the rough texture of
grainy bread on my tongue
and the sweet, liquid acid of grape
in my throat
are a bittersweet memory of
compassion
and a taste of heaven.

II. God's Overflowing Abundance.

Returning, for a moment, to the image of the empty jars, if we speak financially, we might think of our pledge as contributing to the whole. We give our portion, large or small, and God's Spirit works among us to multiply our gifts. Soon the jars are overflowing.

Some of us face great difficulty in giving – we are out of work, or living on fixed incomes; we are having difficulty paying our bills. Some of us are having difficulty buying food or keeping a roof over our heads.

Others are living well with few financial worries.

Today's reading from 2 Kings speaks to the first group – the group that is struggling – and reassures them that God will provide.

If we peek at the next story in chapter 4, we see that the well-to-do are also addressed. In this story a wealthy woman is rewarded for providing for Elisha's needs in a sacrificial way.

The upshot is that whether we think of ourselves as rich or poor, we have received abundantly from God just by being alive in this beautiful world.

And whether we are rich or poor, we can respond gratefully to God's gifts by giving sacrificially to the work of His kingdom. Sacrificial giving means different things in different circumstances. But if we pray and search our hearts God will direct us in our giving.

Adam Hamilton is Senior Pastor of the 15,000-member United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas. He wrote a wonderful little book entitled, Enough. In this book, Hamilton suggests six steps for financial planning that can be helpful to any of us, regardless of our financial situation:

1. Step One in Hamilton's approach: Pay your tithe and offering first.
2. Step Two: Create a budget and track your expenses.
3. Step Three: Simplify your lifestyle. In other words, live below your means.
4. Step Four: Establish an emergency fund.
5. Step Five: Pay off your credit cards, use cash or debit for purchases, and use credit wisely.
6. Step Six: Practice long-term savings and investing habits.

Hamilton has this advice for paying off credit card debt:

"1. Start with the card that has the lowest balance. Determine the amount you can pay each month over the minimum payment in order to completely eliminate this debt. Be aggressive, pay it off, and celebrate when it is paid.

"2. Next, move to the card with the next lowest balance. Apply the same amount you paid on the first card payment plus the minimum required and eliminate that credit card debt.

"3. Continue to pay off each credit card in this way, one at a time, until they are all paid

off. By using the determined amount plus the minimum you can become debt free. Each credit card that is paid off and cut up is a step closer to financial peace.”

III. Keep Pouring.

It is difficult to have faith when times are tough.

But think of the poor widow: her prophet husband has died; in spite of their faithful service for many years, she is left with no income, and many debts; and the creditors are coming to carry off her two children into slavery, as payment for her debts.

If anyone has a reason for gloom and despair, it is this woman.

But she goes to Elisha and does as he instructs, continuing to have faith in God.

If we have faith, God will provide for us. God’s provision may not be what we expect; it may not come when we expect it; but we will witness the abundance of God’s grace if we give gratefully and sacrificially.

“ * when the winds and waves threaten to swamp our boat, God can be trusted;

“ * when the bottom comes out of our world and we start falling and falling and falling, God can be trusted;

“ * when the financial resources we had counted on are suddenly gone, God can be trusted;

“ * when we have hit the bottom and are afraid we will never get back up, God can be trusted.” (Leininger)

The widow in the story trusts in God’s abundance, as the prophet promises her.

And then she does her part.

She gathers all the jugs and containers she can find. She keeps pouring the oil until there are no containers left to put it in.

Collecting jugs and pouring oil – what would that look like for you and me today?

It could be filling out one more job application if you're out of work. It could be finding a financial mentor to help you develop a plan, if you're in debt. It could be looking at your possessions and your talents and discovering new, creative ways to make more money. It could be praying and planning and asking God to be at the center of your financial decisions. It could be getting together with other Christians and starting a money management support group. There are endless ways to do our part – to keep pouring because we trust in God.

James Brown (of the Evangeline Baptist Church in Wildsville, Louisiana) tells this story:

“There is no situation I can get into that God cannot get me out. Some years ago when I was learning to fly, my instructor told me to put the plane into a steep and extended dive. I was totally unprepared for what was about to happen. After a brief time the engine stalled, and the plane began to plunge out-of-control. It soon became evident that the instructor was not going to help me at all. After a few seconds, which seemed like eternity, my mind began to function again. I quickly corrected the situation.

“Immediately I turned to the instructor and began to vent my fearful frustrations on him. He very calmly said to me, ‘There is no position you can get this airplane into that I cannot get you out of. If you want to learn to fly, go up there and do it again.’ At that moment God seemed to be saying to me, ‘Remember this. As you serve Me, there is no situation you can get yourself into that I cannot get you out of. If you trust me, you will be all right.’ That lesson has been proven true in my ministry many times over the years.”

Closing.

God rewards faithfulness with abundance. As the poor widow gathers empty vessels, so we gather empty vessels – ourselves – into the church. And what faith we have we pour into one

another, trusting that God's Spirit will multiply our faith and bless us with abundant joy.

Financially, we each pour a bit of our oil, a bit of our money, into the common pot, and it is multiplied by the Spirit of God working within others to encourage their giving, too.

A miracle is possible in this place – enough to pay our debts, with extra left over for us to live on. This is true of our personal finances; it is also true of our communal finances as a church family. God's abundance overflows for those who trust in Him.

Of course, spiritually speaking we are already “debt-free.” Jesus has paid the price.

May we learn to trust Him more and more each day.

Amen.