

“Meaningful Giving”

October 24, 2021

Scripture: I Kings 17:8-16; Luke 10:38-42

The widow in the Elijah’s story is in a special category that’s often referred to in scripture. She’s part of the group widows, orphans and aliens. Aliens were what we might call undocumented immigrants. They were the most vulnerable people in society and during a time of drought or famine, like the one happening when this story takes place, they were especially at risk. So, it should be no surprise that this woman isn’t too keen on the idea of helping out a man she’s never seen before who wasn’t even from her country.

The widow is trapped by the threat of scarcity. She has only a little bit of flour left to make a tiny bit of food for herself and her son. And after using it to prepare their last meal, as she says, they will “eat it and die.” But Elijah offers her an alternative. He offers her the possibility of an abundance she has never imagined; an abundance that will snatch her life from the jaws of death if she’s only able to perform one last act of generosity.

Can you imagine how hard it must have been for her to do that? The story doesn’t really convey how frightening it must have been for her to offer this stranger a bit of the very last morsel she has left. But generosity has a way of building on itself. Once the first step is taken, once that first gift is made, it becomes easier to do it again. Once we learn to trust in God’s provision being generous starts to feel like our second nature. And the illusion of scarcity is broken through, penetrated by the reality of abundance.

The widow in the story has all but given up to despair. Elijah as God’s spokesman brings her the promise of hope if she can bring herself to act. Experiencing God’s abundance requires something of us. It’s not enough just to wait for it passively. We must act, we must reach out in generosity, even if it means risking our own well-being. God’s abundance is available to anyone willing to act on it. It’s much like how Jesus describes God’s kingdom. He’s asked once in Luke’s gospel where God’s kingdom can be found and his answer is “all around you.” But over and over Jesus invites his followers to reach out and take hold of it. We do that through meaningful action.

The story of Martha and Mary gives some insight into what that means. Most of the time when we hear that story we sort of see Martha as the one with the problem. But she really does have a point. Mary should help; she should do her share to prepare things for their guests. Without Martha’s work where would they be? I think the two of them represent two sides of the same coin of discipleship. Martha represents action and Mary represents contemplation. We’re called to both. One without the other leaves us incomplete. If all we’re concerned with is action, we’ll just be spinning our wheels. But if we’re only concerned with contemplation we’ll never accomplish anything that makes a difference. This story teaches us we need both.

The question is when do we emphasize one over the other? In this instance, with Jesus in the room, Mary has made the right choice. Martha's action distracts her from being in the moment and appreciating Jesus' presence. But in our own day-to-day lives we need to make room for both. If our lives become nothing but frenzied activity we'll always be distracted and miss the possibilities around us. We need to take time for contemplation, to meditate on God's presence so our actions will reflect our intentions as disciples of Christ.

And that's what I think meaningful giving is all about. It's an act of trust, like the widow with Elijah, that risks something dear to us. But it's also the result of contemplative awareness of what's important to us and what's needed from us so God's kingdom can be revealed.

Today we begin our season of stewardship here at North. Over the years we've used a number of themes to help us frame our giving. But we don't often provide a formula to help folks decide what they'll give. And I don't actually have that now but I do have a way of thinking about it that may be helpful. We're asking you this year to give at a level that's meaningful to you. So, this week you'll receive the packet with a letter and a pledge card and some budget information. But before you make a decision I hope you'll take some time for contemplation. Think about what is meaningful in your life, what are the things you do that bring you joy. Some of those things are material and some are intangible, I'm sure, so it may be hard to attach a cost to all of them. But I suspect anything you do that really adds meaning to your life probably comes at a cost.

We're not asking you to somehow monetize everything that gives you meaning. What we're asking you to do this year is let your giving be a reflection of what matters to you. Make it meaningful, not a hardship but also not negligible. What we give should matter to us. How you determine that is up to you. Our hope is everyone will take time in contemplation before taking action. On November 14<sup>th</sup> we're asking you to bring your pledge card to church so we can bring them forward and dedicate them. And I know that all sounds kind of formal and somber but think of it not so much ritualistic as intentional. Stewardship or generosity is a discipline. It's something we do with purpose and not casually. That's why in Elijah's story he tells the widow what to do and makes his solemn pronouncement, "For thus says the Lord, the God of Israel." What he's asking her to do isn't casual; it matters. When Martha is rushing around preparing her home to receive guests what she's doing isn't casual; it matters. And when Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet I imagine her back is straight and her eyes are glued on him, every fiber of her being attentive to what he says; it isn't casual; it matters.

Our generosity matters. What we do as a congregation for one another and for the community and the world matters. So what we give of ourselves here is meaningful. We should feel it; it should matter to us. As we move toward the end of another year of uncertainty and fear because of the pandemic and all its effects on our psyches and behaviors, personally and collectively, I'm hopeful we'll be intentional about how we spend our time and share our abilities and resources. Our community needs this congregation; the world needs places where

there's acceptance and generosity, healing and compassion. We can be like the widow for Elijah, providing an entry into God's abundance through acts of generosity. And we can be like Martha and Mary, two sides of the same coin, acting with meaning in the world through contemplation and devotion. The point is we have something to offer the world that matters. And if we can be intentional in our use of time and abilities and money, we can make a difference in our lives and in the world. I hope you'll choose to take the time you need to discover what really matters to you, what's truly meaningful for your life and help us be the community God is calling us to be for the sake of God's kingdom for the world.

Amen