

MARK 12:38-44  
NOVEMBER 7, '09

“COMMON CENTS & UNCOMMON SENSE”

I'M SURE IT COMES AS NO SURPRISE TO MANY OF YOU TO HEAR THESE WORDS FROM MARK'S GOSPEL TODAY.

AFTER ALL, THIS IS COMMITMENT SUNDAY & THIS PASSAGE – THE STORY WE HAVE LABELLED “THE WIDOW'S MITE” – IS THE QUINTESSENTIAL STEWARDSHIP SERMON SELECTION.

THERE ARE A COUPLE THINGS I'D LIKE TO TELL YOU ABOUT THIS SELECTION, THOUGH.

FIRST OF ALL, THIS ISN'T A PASSAGE OF MY CHOOSING.

IT HAPPENS TO BE THE LECTIONARY GOSPEL READING FOR TODAY & IT JUST HAPPENS TO FALL NEXT IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK AS WE'VE BEEN MAKING OUR WAY THROUGH THE PASSAGES LEADING UP THE PASSION NARRATIVE.

SECONDLY, THIS ISN'T ACTUALLY THE SUNDAY ON WHICH A STEWARDSHIP SERMON SHOULD BE DELIVERED.

THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN LAST SUNDAY.

TODAY, IT SHOULD BE TOO LATE, IF BY “STEWARDSHIP SERMON” WE MEAN A MESSAGE THAT WILL HAVE AN IMPACT ON WHAT YOU DECIDE TO COMMIT TO THE CHURCH IN THE COMING YEAR.

SO LET'S NOT THINK OF THIS PASSAGE IN TERMS OF A “STEWARDSHIP SELECTION.”

LET'S JUST LOOK AT WHAT MESSAGE IT SEEMS TO BE CONVEYING.

OF COURSE, WE MAY DISCOVER THAT THERE'S NO AVOIDING THE CONNECTION.

IT IS RATHER POINTED & YET I'M NOT CONVINCED THAT JESUS IS REALLY TALKING ABOUT MONEY HERE WHEN HE POINTS OUT THIS POOR WIDOW AS A PERSON WHOSE EXAMPLE IS TO BE EMULATED.

THIS PASSAGE IS REALLY TWO STORIES, ISN'T IT?

IT'S TEMPTING – ESPECIALLY FOR THE PREACHER – TO IGNORE THE FIRST ONE.

IT'S TEMPTING TO IGNORE HIS WORDS ABOUT THE SCRIBES – THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS.

THESE WORDS ARE HARSH!

WHEN YOU HEAR THESE WORDS THEY MIGHT REMIND YOU OF A CLOSING SCENE IN “THE GODFATHER.”

MICHAEL CORLEONE IS STANDING AS – WELL -AS GODFATHER FOR HIS INFANT NIECE AT HER BAPTISM.

DURING THE LENGTHY SCENE, THE SOUND REMAINS WITH THE BAPTISM BUT WHAT YOU SEE GOES BACK & FORTH FROM THE EVENTS IN THE CHURCH TO SCENES OF HIT MEN UNDER CORLEONE'S ORDERS PREPARING TO MURDER HIS RIVALS.

THE KILLINGS THEMSELVES COINCIDE EXACTLY WITH CORLEONE'S RENUNCIATION OF SATAN & ALL HIS WORKS.

HERE IN THIS PASSAGE, JESUS GIVES US A SIMILAR SCENE: *“THEY (THE RELIGIOUS PEOPLE) DEVOUR WIDOWS’ HOUSES & FOR THE SAKE OF APPEARANCE SAY LONG PRAYERS...”*

WITH THESE WORDS, HE’S TALKING TO US, ISN’T HE?

MORE SPECIFICALLY, HE’S TALKING TO ME.

LOOK AT WHAT HE SAYS – COULD IT BE MORE OBVIOUS?!

HE’S TELLING US – HE’S TELLING *YOU* – TO BEWARE OF THE GUYS IN THE LONG ROBES.

BEWARE OF THOSE WHO EXPECT TO BE TREATED WITH RESPECT.

*“YES, PREACHER THAT WAS A GOOD SERMON.”*

BEWARE OF THOSE WHO SIT IN THE BEST SEAT IN THE SANCTUARY.

BEWARE OF THOSE WHO GO ON & ON IN THEIR PRAYERS!

AS ROBERT DENIRO’S TRAVIS BICKLE WOULD SAY, *“YOU TALKIN’ TO ME?! YOU TALKIN’ TO ME?!”*

YES, PREACHER, JESUS IS TALKING TO YOU.

AND, IN SOME WAYS, JESUS IS TALKING TO MANY OF YOU AS WELL.

HE CONTRASTS ME – AND MANY OF YOU – WITH THIS POOR WIDOW – A WIDOW WHO GAVE EVERYTHING SHE HAD TO GOD.

I DON’T KNOW IF THIS PASSAGE, THOUGH, IS AS MUCH ABOUT *GIVING* AS IT IS ABOUT *TRUST*.

THE ONLY WAY TO EVEN BEGIN TO COMPREHEND THE ABSURDITY OF WHAT THIS WOMAN DID IS TO UNDERSTAND IT AS THE ULTIMATE STATEMENT OF TRUST.

WHAT SHE GAVE WAS NEGLIGIBLE.

IT WAS SIMPLY A FEW COMMON CENTS.

IT WAS THE SMALLEST OF ALL COINS.

TO PUT IT IN TODAY’S TERMS, EACH OF THOSE 2 COINS WOULDN’T AMOUNT TO A NICKEL!

IT WAS A FEW COMMON CENTS.

BUT WHAT SHE DID WITH THOSE COMMON CENTS TOOK VERY UNCOMMON SENSE, IF YOU GET MY MEANING.

WHAT THIS WIDOW DID IS CHOSE NOT TO PLAY IT SAFE.

SHE WAS LEFT WITH NOTHING & YET SHE FEELS SHE HAS EVERYTHING.

SHE HAS ALLOWED HERSELF TO EXPERIENCE LIFE AS A BLESSING AND GOD AS THE ONE WHO BLESSES – ABUNDANTLY, DRAMATICALLY, EXTRAVAGANTLY.

MORE IMPORTANTLY, SHE HAS DISCOVERED A SPECIAL SECRET ABOUT THE ULTIMATE MEANING OF LIFE.

SHE’S DISCOVERED THAT WHEN WE ARE GENEROUS – EXTRAVAGANTLY GENEROUS – IT IS THEN THAT WE ARE MOST LIKE GOD.

IT IS THEN THAT WE ARE MOST ALIVE.

GARRISON KEILLOR TELLS A WONDERFUL STORY THAT ILLUSTRATES THIS.

*IT'S SUNDAY MORNING.*

*CLARENCE BUNSEN IS NODDING OFF AS THE WORSHIP SERVICE DRONES ON AT THE LAKE WOBEGON CHURCH.*

*HE WAKES UP BARELY IN TIME FOR THE OFFERING.*

*HE REACHES FOR HIS WALLET ONLY TO DISCOVER THAT HE HAS NO CASH.*

*FORTUNATELY, HE DOES HAVE HIS CHECKBOOK.*

*HE TAKES OUT A PEN AND HIDES THE CHECKBOOK IN A PEW BIBLE.*

*HALF AWAKE, HE BEGINS TO WRITE OUT A CHECK FOR \$30.*

*THIS IS MORE THAN HE NORMALLY WOULD GIVE, BUT HE FEELS MORE GENEROUS BECAUSE HE ALMOST HAD A HEART ATTACK THAT WEEK.*

*AND BESIDES, HE KNOWS THAT SOMEONE WILL BE COUNTING THE OFFERING SOON AND HE WANTS THEM TO SEE HOW MUCH HE GAVE.*

*CLARENCE IS TRYING TO WRITE THE CHECK WITHOUT IT BEING OBVIOUS, BUT THE LADY TO HIS RIGHT NOTICES, SO HE DOES NOT LOOK AT WHAT HE IS DOING.*

*HE RIPS OUT THE CHECK AS QUIETLY AS HE CAN, WITH LIMITED SUCCESS - AND WHEN THE OFFERING PLATE COMES BY HE PROUDLY DROPS IT IN, ONLY TO REALIZE MOMENTS LATER THAT INSTEAD OF HAVING WRITTEN \$30 HE HAD WRITTEN \$300!*

*BUT WHAT COULD HE DO?*

*HE COULDN'T GO DOWNSTAIRS AFTER CHURCH, FIND THE DEACONS COUNTING THE COLLECTION AND SAY, "FELLOWS, I MADE A MISTAKE. I GAVE MORE THAN I REALLY WANTED TO."*

*YET, HE HAD GIVEN ALL HE HAD IN THE CHECKING ACCOUNT AND THEN SOME.*

*SURE, HE KNEW THAT GIVING HIS MONEY TO THE CHURCH WAS A NOBLE, CHRIST-LIKE ACT OF FAITH.*

*YET HIS FAMILY MIGHT HAVE TO EAT BEANS AND OATMEAL FOR THE REST OF THE MONTH.*

*ONE THING WAS FOR SURE, HOWEVER; IN THAT MOMENT, CLARENCE BUNSEN FELT TERRIFICALLY AWAKE.*

*HE FELT FULLY ALIVE FOR THE FIRST TIME ALL DAY.*

*EVERY TIME WE GIVE BACK TO GOD, WE HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY TO WAKE UP AND COME ALIVE—NOT IN THE SHOCKED SENSE OF FACING A DILEMMA OF GIVING MORE THAN WE THOUGHT WE WERE ABLE TO GIVE, BUT IN THE JOYOUS WONDER THAT EXTRAVAGANT GENEROSITY MAKES US FEEL LIKE WE WERE ALWAYS MEANT TO FEEL.*

IT HAS BEEN SUGGESTED THAT WE ARE HARDWIRED FOR GENEROSITY.

I THINK THAT'S TRUE.

IF YOU HAVE YOUR DOUBTS – TRY THIS.

THINK ABOUT A PERSON IN YOUR LIFE – THINK OF SOMEONE YOU KNOW – WHO EMBODIES THE IDEA OF LOVING THEIR NEIGHBOR – OF LIVING & GIVING GENEROUSLY.

NOW, THINK OF THEIR EYES, THEIR DEMEANOR, THE LOOK ON THEIR FACE, THE TURN OF THEIR MOUTH.

HOLD THAT IMAGE FOR A MOMENT.

NOW THINK OF SOMEONE YOU KNOW WHO NEVER SEEMS TO THINK OF ANYONE BUT THEMSELVES – SOMEONE WHO IS SELF-CENTERED, SELF-SUFFICIENT & SELF-CONSUMED – SOMEONE WHO BEGRUDGES EVERY PENNY & EVERY MINUTE THEY HAVE TO GIVE TO SOMEONE ELSE.

THINK OF *THAT* PERSON'S EYES, DEMEANOR, LOOK & MOUTH.

ALL RIGHT – PUT THOSE TWO FACES SIDE BY SIDE.

CAN YOU SEE CLEARLY THAT ONE OF THOSE INDIVIDUALS IS LIVING THE WAY WE WERE MEANT TO LIVE & THE OTHER HAS COMPLETELY MISSED THE POINT?

WHICH ONE DO YOU SUPPOSE LOOKS MOST LIKE THIS WIDOW IN MARK'S GOSPEL?

NOW, I SAID THIS PASSAGE ISN'T NECESSARILY JUST ABOUT MONEY.

OH, IT'S ABOUT *THAT* – BUT IT'S ABOUT SO MUCH MORE THAN MONEY.

LAST SPRING, DURING LENT, I SUGGESTED THAT MARK'S GOSPEL IS CAREFULLY & INTENTIONALLY ARRANGED.

I THINK THIS PASSAGE IS YET ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF THIS.

IMMEDIATELY AFTER THIS EVENT, JESUS TALKS YET AGAIN ABOUT HIS APPROACHING DEATH & THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS BEGIN TO SET IN MOTION THE PLOT THAT WILL EVENTUALLY BE THE CAUSE OF THAT DEATH.

JESUS NOTICED THIS WOMAN IN THE MIDST OF ALL THOSE WHO HAD GATHERED IN THE TEMPLE THAT DAY BECAUSE SHE REMINDED HIM OF SOMEONE.

SHE HAD NOTHING LEFT & IT WAS THE END FOR HER.

IT WAS THE END FOR HIM AS WELL.

SHE GAVE ALL THAT SHE HAD.

HE DID THE SAME.

SHE WITHHELD NOTHING FROM GOD.

NEITHER DID HE.

WHEN JESUS SEES THIS WOMAN, IT'S ALMOST AS IF HE'S LOOKING IN A MIRROR.

HE'S LOOKING AT HIMSELF.

HE CALLS THE DISCIPLES TO HIS SIDE & SAYS, “*HERE. LOOK AT HER. THIS IS WHAT I’VE BEEN TALKING TO YOU ABOUT FOR THREE YEARS! THIS IS WHAT IT MEANS TO GIVE. THIS IS WHAT IT MEANS TO TRUST. THIS IS WHAT IT MEANS TO LIVE IN EXTRAVAGANT GENEROSITY.*”

AMONG THE MOST MEANINGFUL & INFLUENTIAL WORDS I HAVE EVER READ ARE WORDS THAT I DISCOVERED IN DAG HAMMARSKJOLD’S SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY MARKINGS.

I FIRST READ THIS COLLECTION OF PERSONAL REFLECTIONS WHEN I WAS IN HIGH SCHOOL & I LABELLED SOME OF THE REFLECTIONS WITH STARS.

SOME GOT ONE STAR, OTHERS GOT 2 OR 3.

I GAVE ONE PARTICULAR BRIEF REFLECTION 4 STARS.

I RE-READ THE BOOK AT A TIME IN MY LIFE WHEN I WAS SEEKING TO DETERMINE WHAT GOD HAD IN STORE FOR ME.

ON THE ONE HAND, THERE WAS A CLEAR PATH THAT COMMON SENSE TOLD ME TO FOLLOW.

ON THE OTHER HAND, THERE WAS A NEBULUS FUTURE THAT REQUIRED A FRIGHTENING JOURNEY – A JOURNEY THAT COULD ONLY BE TAKEN BY USING VERY “UNCOMMON SENSE.”

IN THAT DECISION-MAKING TIME, I ONCE AGAIN CAME ACROSS HAMMARSKJOLD’S WORDS THAT I HAD MARKED WITH 4 STARS SEVERAL YEARS BEFORE WITHOUT REALLY KNOWING WHY.

“*TO BE FREE, TO BE ABLE TO STAND UP & LEAVE EVERYTHING BEHIND WITHOUT LOOKING BACK – TO SAY YES.*”

I THINK THAT’S WHAT JESUS IS TALKING ABOUT HERE WHEN HE POINTS OUT THE COMMITMENT OF THIS POOR WIDOW.

IT’S NOT ABOUT MONEY AS MUCH AS IT’S ABOUT TRUST.

IT’S ABOUT A WILLINGNESS TO LEAVE EVERYTHING BEHIND & SAY “YES” TO GOD – TRUSTING THAT EXTRAVAGANT GENEROSITY IS REALLY AT THE VERY CORE OF OUR BEING.

AS YOU COME FORWARD TODAY & PLACE YOUR COMMITMENT CARD ON THE COMMUNION TABLE & YOUR LEAF ON THE TREE, I HOPE THE LOOK WRITTEN ALL OVER YOUR FACE IS A LOOK OF JOY IN YOUR EXTRAVAGANT GENEROSITY.

I HOPE YOUR COMMON CENTS - HOWEVER MUCH IT IS – HAS LEFT YOU WITH THE UNCOMMON SENSE OF BEING FREE – OF BEING ABLE TO STAND UP & LEAVE EVERYTHING BEHIND WITHOUT LOOKING BACK & SAYING YES. AMEN.

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