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Pentecost 23B: 1 Kings 17:8-16, Psalm 146, Hebrews 9:23-28, Mark 12:38-44

Have faith and trust that your giving will be blessed.

In the name of the creator, the redeemer and the sanctifier. Amen

There are a few things that come together today. Firstly we have done and survived the twilight fair – WELL DONE EVERYBODY!! What a day!! And secondly in discussions with Parish Council, I set aside this Sunday and next to highlight the whole issue of stewardship. We knew that this Sunday came straight after the fair but that actually seems like a pretty good time.

There are a thousand things one could say about stewardship but I particularly like this definition....Stewardship is what I do, with all that I have, after I say, “I believe” and using the gifts God has given us to do the work God is calling us to do. When we talk about the gifts we have been given we are talking about our talents and skills, our energy, our time and our money and ultimately our very selves.

Now ministers and priests by and large don't like talking about stewardship or bluntly money. I know I don't. While priests seem to be pretty good at talking about politics and religion –topics avoided by most right-minded people – money is not something they are comfortable with.

Well there are a couple of good reasons I think and I am going to state it in black and white. One is that it is your money that goes in the plate, or the ADF account, that pays my living or whoever the incumbent rector is– in our case that's Rob. A full time minister does not come cheaply and in the Anglican Church here their living is provided entirely by the parish. The central diocese does not provide any cash although it provides numerous services to clergy. On the whole our diocese is very cash poor and certainly does not have vast sums of money sitting around although we are much better off than many.

So the first reason why ministers don't like talking about money is that they feel somehow like they are asking for money for themselves. I remember the first time I started to be paid for work I had always done voluntarily. It just didn't feel right.

The next reason ministers don't like talking about money is that they are only too aware of what members of the congregation consistently give in terms of talents and skills, time, energy and money. During the week I

see this all the time. People are wonderfully generous with their giving here from doing the flowers, to cleaning, gardening, polishing brass, buying liturgical supplies, attending meetings, reading reports, banking money, collecting money, manning op shops, emptying clothing bins, sorting clothes, feeding the needy, preaching, assisting in leading worship, playing music, singing music, to caring for each other, to caring for me, to organizing twilight fairs and manning the stalls, to cleaning up after it all and counting the takings and to giving of money – the list goes on and on.

When the minister gets up to talk about giving they feel as if they are preaching to the well and truly converted. Which reminds me of what Martin Luther said:

People go through three conversions in the Christian faith: their head, their heart and their pocketbook.

Well it might be difficult talking about giving but we can't actually get away from it. Interestingly enough Jesus never seems to have any problem bringing up the topic. In parables and teachings he addresses the issue of money frequently. Many times it is in terms of our attitude to money – whether we are attached to it or not as in the story of the rich young man or whether it is used for the kingdom of God as in the parable of the pearl of great price. In the case of today's gospel reading it is about how much we give and why – what is in our hearts.

Incidentally today's gospel reading was not purposefully chosen. It just happened to be the lectionary one for today and I did not even realize it until Wednesday this week! I then chose the other option for the Old Testament reading, the widow of Zarephath. Two stories of poor widows who in response to the call of God in their lives gave all they had. Now the point of the stories is not that the widows impoverished themselves, they were impoverished already, but that poor as they were they put their hope in God not in accumulating wealth. In stark contrast to these two widows, are the religious and political leaders of the day who strove to accumulate wealth and put their hope in their efforts and in the wealth they had accumulated.

Now, as Jesus teaches in the synagogue, he warns of certain scribes who are the professional interpreters of the Law who “walk around” ostentatiously, sought honour in public places and prestige at synagogues and at banquets. In Jesus day scribes were often legal trustees of a widow's estate and they charged exorbitantly for their services. The fee was usually a part of the estate, but some took the “widows' houses”. Although they kept up an appearance of piety that is all it was, an appearance.

On the other hand, the “poor widow” is held up by Jesus as an example of good discipleship. In the story Jesus is “opposite the treasury” possibly in the outer court of the Temple, where people placed their offerings in chests. The widow makes a real sacrifice in giving two *leptas*, the lowest value coin in circulation and they were all she had. She gave all she had. When you stop to think about it Jesus and the Widow were just alike. Remember, Jesus was on his way to the cross when he said these words. He and the widow both gave everything they had.

Does this mean we should give *everything* we have? Some of us are indeed called to that type of stewardship. Yet I think the point of the story for everyone is not how much we give but how we give it. Jesus is making a comparison between the scribes who looked holy and righteous but gave nothing of themselves and certainly very little of their wealth. Rather they took from others who could not afford. There was no real sacrifice in their giving and no real sign that they were moving into the Kingdom of God.

In comparison the poor widow, in a very quiet and humble way, gives what she has and it entails some real sacrifice. Giving in this way is only possible when we give through love and for a higher purpose. There is great trust and faith involved in this type of giving, trust and faith that dis-empowers any fear and reservations.

If you go back a little in this story you have a scribe asking Jesus: *which is the greatest commandment?* His agreement that to love God and to love one’s neighbour are the most important has led Jesus to tell him that he is almost ready for the kingdom of God.

This whole story of giving is put in the perspective of the great commandment that we read out most services – you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength and you shall love your neighbour as yourself.

I was actually writing this sermon sitting in my office watching St. Philipians run backwards and forwards setting up the fair. Sometimes it is hard to remember why we are doing things at church. However there **is** a vision and a purpose to all this effort! The great commandment is our basis. Organizing, setting up and running a fair is about loving God and loving neighbours.

A church community is a place where the love of God shown in the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is remembered, taught and lived out. We do that by coming together, giving thanks and praise,

remembering in word and sacraments, caring for each other, the earth and others in our community and practicing forgiveness and reconciliation. We generally employ a minister to lead and help in that process

I believe very strongly in the importance and value of a Church community. There are many arguments I could make but I am going to talk about this whole issue again next week. It really is a critical element in our ministry to the wider community.

For know I'd just like to say anther big THANK YOU to everyone for today's effort. As you are sitting there probably feeling exhausted remember the two widows in today's stories. They are held up as an example of selfless and holy giving and how that type of giving is blessed by God. Like the widows we are encouraged to trust in God, trust that our efforts will bring fruit and trust that what we are giving really is for a higher purpose – the love of God shown forth in the world. Amen.