

Lord, You Can Count on Us!

Stewardship Sunday
The Reverend J. Stewart Hardy, Ph.D.

Saturday and Sunday, November 7 and 8, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

1 Kings 17:8-16; Psalm 146;
Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

There was a rapid and frantic knocking at the front door of the hut occupied by a Lutheran missionary in Africa. Answering the door, the missionary found one of the native boys standing there, holding a very large fish in his hands. The boy said, "Pastor, you taught us what tithing is, so here – I've brought you my tithe!"

As the missionary gratefully took the fish, he questioned the young lad. "If this is your tithe, where are the other nine fish?" At this, the boy beamed and said, "Oh, they're still in the river; I'm going back to catch them now!"

What a beautiful gift, and what a dignified and uncalculated response of love and respect. And what great trust, that the river would yet provide.

I suspect the widow's gift to the Temple treasury was something of the same sort. I really don't think she was acting in response to a stewardship sermon that had been offered earlier in the Temple; but I do think it was a pure and loving response to the mission of God. She gave to it what she had. Note also that she wasn't intending to become the poster child for good stewardship or the object of every Lutheran stewardship sermon for eternity. She was simply an unidentified widowed woman who gave what she had – a gift to God, to a God who first loved her.

It's not the amount she gave that attracts Jesus' attention. Her gift was minuscule, it made absolutely no difference to the budget of the Temple, it didn't meet even one of the Temple's great expenses. In fact, it had very little to do with the Temple, other than the fact that the Temple remained the place where such gifts were to be given. And it hasn't changed, has it?

In the first place, her gift was to God. But then, surely that's what our giving is about also. A thankful response to God for all that He has done for us. Salaries, utilities, expenses, budget items are secondary indeed. First and foremost, our giving is our response, it's our gift to God; it's our thanksgiving gift. Money, wealth, and its abundance or lack, were just as important to people and nation and church in Jesus' day as it is today. Ancient Rabbis, when teaching about giving, often said that people should not give more than 20%, or a fifth of their income, to the temple, lest they themselves became poverty stricken and then become dependent on the Temple's charity themselves.

The standard gift to the work of God in Jesus' time was the tithe, one tenth of one's earnings. That hasn't changed; it's still the expected standard. In fact, more recently, it has become part of

a giving formula that is growing in popularity across Christian churches everywhere. It is advertised on this tiny little button I am wearing' 10-10-80. 10% to God, 10% to savings, and 80% for expenses. It's a wonderful formula.

Last night when I was preaching at the five thirty service, we had around twenty-five children in attendance. I thought I had brought enough dimes to give each child ten dimes, but there were twenty-five children there and I had only enough dimes for twenty-two, so three children missed out. We talked about my 10-10-80 button. In no time at all, the children realized what to do. They put their first dime in the offering basket, and put one dime aside to keep for themselves. Then the question arose about what to do with the eight dimes left in each hot little hand. In no time at all, the children realized what to do with the rest of their dimes. A little girl jumped up and said, "Let's share our dimes with the kids who got none!" And they set about to share what they had. A genuine lesson in stewardship indeed!

Jesus has a great deal to say about money and wealth; in fact they are almost His most frequently talked of topics. So what He witnessed in the Temple had a huge impact on Him. It wasn't the amount of the widow's gift that caught His attention; it was the proportion of her gift that astonished Him. She gave everything, while others who gave (and their gifts certainly were very substantial) had a great deal of wealth and money left over and they gave out of their abundance.

Of course, we have to realize that Jesus isn't trying to set us up to demand all our wealth, all our money. Far from it! What He is trying to do is draw attention to commitment, our personal commitment to God and how it looks.

You see, when it comes to our personal commitment, there is no holding back. Such commitment to God is so easily demonstrated. In fact, our real commitment is demonstrated in what we do and what we say without our even thinking about it – our commitment to spouse, our commitment to our children, our commitment to our family, our commitment to our job and workplace, and our commitment to our church.

It is said, with a disturbing degree of accuracy, that if we bother to read the register in our checkbook, we will see where our commitment really lies! It is there that the real heart of the problem of wealth and money becomes evident. In fact, it is the monster facing us and our nation at this very moment. Because of the lack of constraint with its concomitant irresponsibility, arrogance and greed, where money and wealth once served this nation and individuals as a great servant, it has now become a tyrannical master. When money comes first in the life of individual or nation, it isn't long before difficulties follow. Nationally, we have seen this happening in the burgeoning fiscal fiasco that plagues so many individuals and currently engulfs our nation.

Jesus had much to say about the destructive power of misunderstood and mishandled wealth and money. Jesus tells us of a young man who when invited to join Jesus and His disciples, turned away because of his attachment to his possessions. And then there was the wealthy man who lived in a wonderful mansion. He was a good guy, easy going as you please, entertained his friends, but who was totally blind to the needs of the poverty-stricken beggar who crouched in his rags at the man's gate.

But, let's be clear, these and so many comments that Jesus makes do not condemn wealth. Rather, Jesus seeks to have people understand the power of wealth and money, and its proper place in a well-balanced life of faith. You see Jesus' concern is focused on what we do with the totality of our finances, not simply what we put in our offering envelopes. The point is the heart of Christian stewardship helps us plan how to use what wealth and money we have.

There's a delightful story about a young boy during a math lesson in an elementary school class where the teacher was fond of asking awkward questions. (Maybe they asked easy questions, but I never had a great time with math and I always thought their questions were tricks.) Anyway, the teacher asked this little boy a simple question: "If you had one dollar in your hand and your father gave you another dollar, how many dollars would you have?" Without hesitation the boy replied, "One dollar!" "Oh no," the teacher responded, "you didn't understand the question." To which the boy shot back, "You don't understand my father!"

The question before us today is just as simple. Of all the dollars we have, how many dollars are we going to give to God?" Not to the church, not to the budget, but to God? For genuine giving to God will far exceed the budgetary needs of the congregation.

Which brings us back to this little button. Scripture calls for us to tithe, to give one tenth. And it's left to each of us to figure out what that tenth will be. Which leaves us with nine tenths, 90%. What's of equal importance is what we do with that remaining amount. The little button suggests saving a tenth – isn't that an odd suggestion in America today? To save a tenth and use the remaining eight tenths, 80%, as disposable income.

It's a very simple way of prioritizing our financial affairs in such a way that we honor God, make preparation for our future, and take care of our everyday needs. You see, in the end it's not just about the pledge we make in regard to our offering, although that is part of the larger picture; it's about God's guidance in the management of our total financial situation. But it's more than that! It's about the totality of our lives.

God has invested all that He has for our sake. He doesn't want us burdened; the last thing He wants is for Stu Hardy to preach dunning money sermons. He doesn't want you oppressed, or fearful about making it. He wants us to be free – free to enjoy Him, free to enjoy what money and wealth you have (be it great or little), free to have His companionship, His counsel, and His ever present help.

Now let me be quite clear and differentiated from so many preachers you may hear. God does not promise any one of us a cake walk, though some of us are and will be blessed with a wonderful life. He doesn't offer a life free from challenge and suffering, though some of us perhaps are or will be blessed with relatively calm and peaceful lives. And, He doesn't promise us that we'll be extraordinarily wealthy little Bill Gates' simply because we follow Him, though some of us will be blessed with great fortune.

What He does promise us is His presence and His support when we find ourselves in need of His strength, forgiveness, and love. And that, secured and given to us, is in Christ Jesus and the gift

of the Holy Spirit. God promises that not even death will defeat us, for we are promised a life after death.

The question simply is: What does our thanksgiving, our response, look like? How will we respond to His extraordinary free and unconditional gift of life and love and grace? That response, I think, looks something like this.

Hal Brady was senior minister at First United Methodist Church in Dallas, Texas. He had a favorite stewardship story that he loved to tell. His bishop, Bishop McCabe, was trying to raise a million dollars for missions. Opening his mail one day, the Bishop was dismayed at the number of disappointing letters and discouraging responses. Then the Bishop opened a letter out of which tumbled a badly battered nickel. With the nickel came a letter from a young boy. It read: "Dear Bishop, I'm so glad you are going to get a million dollars for our missions and missionaries. I'm going to help you get it, too. Here's my nickel towards it! It's all I've got now, but when you want any more, call on me!"

Today beloved, Christ calls on us for help for His ministry and His mission in this place next year. Christ stands at the door of our hearts and He asks us for our financial commitment, for our thankful response to all that He has done. May God give us the grace to respond, "Lord we hear your call. You can count on us!"

Amen.