

Pentecost 27
November 16, 2008
Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

I Kings 17:8-16 Luke 21:1-4

Breaking & Sharing

Thanks for keeping me on my toes! Keep that feedback coming.

We're now three weeks into our annual stewardship campaign. As letter everyone received the first week of November talked about, this year's stewardship campaign is focused around the four central actions in our weekly Eucharist – Taking, Blessing, Breaking, and Giving. These are also the central actions in the story of the feeding of the 5,000 as found in the Gospel of Mark. This four-fold pattern provides a pattern for our Christian stewardship.

First, all that we receive is a gift from God. All that we do in this life is manage all that God has given us, most notably our selves, our time, and our talents. If you'll remember, I spent some time during my first several weeks here talking about stewardship as a holistic concept, meaning that stewardship encompasses all of life.

As Martin Luther said in his reflection on the First Article of the Apostles' Creed:

I believe that God has created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties.

In addition, God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse and children, fields, livestock, and all property – along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life. God protects me against all danger and shield and preserves me from all evil. All this is done out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all!

Second, as we take all that God gives, we need to stop and recognize these gifts. This is the act of blessing. It's a way of recognizing the sacred characteristic that runs through all of life. And when we stop to bless or thank God for all that we take, we realize that all we have is a gift from God; we are no longer self-reliant, but rely on God who provides all the things we need to sustain life. Luther summed up the act of blessing in his explanation to the First Article of the Creed when he said: "For all this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him."

This brings us to the third action, breaking. Breaking is the act of dividing what we have to share with those around us. It prepares our assets for distribution. It

turns these gifts we bring into assets for investment into God's ongoing mission work in the world.

Finally we have our fourth action, sharing. As the name of our stewardship program implies, our sharing is intended to be 100% Bold. We share because we remember what God has done for us, while at the same time we look hopefully to the future. We move forward with 100% boldness, seeking to actively participate in the ministries that God has prepared for us.

Which brings us to today's readings. Our first reading is from the book of First Kings. This is at the very beginning of the prophet Elijah's ministry. He has just been called by God. Having just delivered the news of an oncoming drought to King Ahab, God tells Elijah to go to the east. The reason for this is two-fold: First, having delivered the bad news to Ahab, Elijah's life is probably in danger. As we hear so many times in the Old Testament, prophets who deliver bad news often find their lives in danger. But second, and probably more importantly, Elijah's wanderings gives God the opportunity to form Elijah into a prophet. The first story we hear is that Elijah goes into the wilderness, where the birds, acting as God's agents, provide him all the food he needed to survive. It is during his time in the wilderness that Elijah is totally reliant on God for all he needs to survive.

Then we come to today's story. Elijah is told to go to Zarapheth where God has told a woman to feed him. When Elijah arrives at this place, he finds a rich widow who, because of the drought, no longer has enough for her and her son to survive. She's getting ready to make a final meal for her and her son, because once that food is gone, there will be nothing more. She knows they're going to die. But because God has commanded her to, she acts in bold faith – she takes what meager means she has, a little bit of meal and some oil, and breaks and shares those with Elijah. Because of her faith, God gives her a miracle: the jar of meal and jug of oil never empty until rain comes, when the earth will once again provide all they need to survive.

And then we have this little story from the Gospel of Luke. Jesus was in the temple when he saw people, both rich and poor, giving their offerings. He saw a widow take two small copper coins and put them into the treasury. This action was probably not noticed by many, if anyone – after all, isn't it the BIG gifts we notice? Those two little copper coins, called lepta, were nothing. It would have taken 128 of those small copper coins to make up even a single denarius, a day's wage. And yet Jesus says: "This poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them gave out of their abundance, but she in her poverty has given all she had to live on."

This simple little story has so much to teach us about generous giving. First of all, generous giving is proportionate. How much we give only matters in proportion to how much we keep. In the first story we heard that the widow at Zarapheth shared all that she had with Elijah. And in this story from Luke we hear that the widow didn't give much, but she gave all that she had – and because of this she had given more than anyone else. The actual amount she gave was small, but the proportion was HUGE.

“Why does the proportion matter? Because it's a commentary on the status of our heart. The proportion of our giving speaks to the status of our heart before God, the openness of our spirit, and the depth of our gratitude.”¹

“Consider this: a philanthropy study a few years ago found that those who earned under \$10,000 gave an average of 5.2% of their income to charity. Those who earned between \$10,000 and \$19,999 gave an average of 3.3% of their income. And those who earned between \$75,000 and \$99,999 gave only 1.6%... How much you give only matters in proportion to how much you keep. Generous giving is proportionate.”²

The second thing we can take from today's Gospel reading is that generous giving is sacrificial. Giving out of our excess is not generous giving. Both of our readings today tell us of people who shared everything they had. But in the second

story, the widow's mite, you don't hear Jesus remarking on the giving of the rich people. "It was the sacrifice of the widow that moved his heart. I'm not saying you shouldn't give if you're not doing it sacrificially; what I'm saying is that I don't believe that kind of giving strengthens our faith."³

"One of the reasons I believe God calls us to give sacrificially is that it strengthens our faith. If we merely give out of our excess we don't give God the opportunity to prove God's faithfulness."⁴

Perhaps this gets to the very heart of our stewardship... the issue of trusting in God. Perhaps we need to examine whether or not we truly trust God enough to provide all the things we need for life if we give in the way that God instructs us to.

I am a firm believer in the biblical concept of the tithe – giving 10% of what we earn back to the church. Now I've been in several different churches where this becomes a real hot-button topic. I've even had a congregation's stewardship chair tell me that, well, it's not *really* 10% to the *church*. You can take that 10% and give it where ever you want, so long as it's in charitable giving, he said. No, I said, that's not what the Bible says. Look it up. The notion of the 10% tithe is based in the offering of first-fruits... note I say **FIRST** fruits. It's 10% off the top. And it's 10% to the church. Look it up.

I'd like to share a couple of stories with you about tithing. The first one is from my own experience. When I entered seminary one of the first pieces of advice given to us was that if we were not currently tithing to at least begin working proportionately toward it. John Mark and I took up the challenge, and immediately began tithing. Very shortly thereafter something went wrong with our finances, or so I thought. I spent hours pouring over our checkbook, but long story short, we had money that I had no idea where it came from. I mentioned this to my friend, and she said that she, too, had had the same experience. Now she was an accountant prior to coming to seminary, so you'd think that she knows how to balance a checkbook. We talked about it for quite some time, but we couldn't figure out where our new-found wealth came from. Finally I asked her, "Did you recently start tithing?" "Yes," she said. I confessed that we had as well. Even though it was beyond belief, we accepted our new-found wealth as based in the fact that we had recently started tithing.

Second story: My father started tithing, for the first time in his life, earlier this year. Now my father is retired, and on a fixed income, so this was a bold act of faith on his part. I didn't know he'd done this. But we were talking on the phone one day when he mentioned that suddenly he'd found himself in a much better financial position than he'd ever dreamed possible. We talked around about it for a while,

about his investments and such, but we didn't find any answers there. So I asked him, "Did you recently start tithing?" "Yes," he said. I laughed and said, "That's why you're now feeling so wealthy!" Now, being a sometimes wise pastor, I knew better than to ask him to sit down and systematically examine his accounts to see if we was truly better off financially than before he'd started tithing. The important thing was that he felt more financially secure than ever before, and he was giving with a happy heart. He was giving with thankfulness, and he felt blessed.

Now I can't promise any of you that if you suddenly start tithing you'll truly find yourselves better off financially. But my point is, that when you give off the top, your first-fruits, and do it with thankfulness and praise, I think you'll find that you will, indeed, feel blessed.

But I would also not be a responsible pastor in these tough economic times if I didn't say that you also need to act responsibly in your giving. If you're currently giving 1% of your income, then chances are that moving immediately to a full tithe will be too much for you. It takes time and good management of our financial resources to make such a big move. So I would encourage you to consider increasing your giving a couple of percent, and make a vow to yourself to increase that each year toward the 10% goal.

“If we’re going to practice generous giving it will require us to manage our lifestyle. You cannot live out Christian stewardship and float along the cultural river of consumerism. If you want to live as a Christian steward you’re going to have to swim against the flow.

“You and I live in a culture of excess, a culture that sweeps us along with a clear message, ‘You need more, you deserve more... and you don’t even have to pay for it now!’” And it’s this very same notion that’s gotten this country into the economic mess that we’re in now. It’s the notion that “‘You are what you own.’ But that is not the truth of the Gospel. We are people who know who we are and how much we’re worth, not by what we spend but by what God has spent... the life of Jesus Christ on a cross.

“We cannot practice generous giving unless we manage our lifestyle, making financial choices that are consistent with the Word of God, not with the latest edition of *Better Homes and Gardens*. Continually buying what we don’t need, with money we don’t have, to impress people we don’t even like, will not allow us the freedom to give proportionately or sacrificially. Generous giving requires us to manage our lifestyle.

“Generous giving flows from a heart that has been genuinely touched by the amazing grace and goodness of God. We don’t give to earn God’s favor; we give because God has so freely poured God’s favor into our lives.

“So let me leave you with two questions to consider this week. First, how much do you honestly believe you have received from God in every area of your life? And second, is your giving a proportionate expression of your gratitude?”⁵

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¹ *Tools for Worship: Worship Helps, November 15-16, 2008* by Changing Church Forum (Burnsville, MN: Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, 2008), 5.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*,

⁵ *Ibid.*