

Sermon 11-08-09<sup>1</sup>

Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17

Mark 12:38-44

*What Offering Can We Make?*

When Amy and I first got married, one of the things we would do together was watch TV. I know this sounds a little pathetic, but with the crazy hours we were both working at the time, it would inevitably happen that the place we would finally see each other was in the living room catching up on the shows we had missed while we were at work. At that time, one of Amy's favorite shows was *So You Think You Can Dance*. She'd come home from work, sit on the couch and click on the DVR while I would curl up in a chair with whatever book I was reading at the time completely disinterested in what she was watching. That didn't last too long.

As our first summer of marital bliss continued on, and Amy would come home to watch the show, I began to catch myself watching "her" dance show. As the season progressed, I was amazed by the way these people could move their bodies and some of the performances were downright amazing. By the time mid-season rolled around, I was permanently hooked. Every week was different and every week we would watch the show together, critiquing various aspects of the performances and laughing at some of the comments made by the judges. This tradition has continued even now.

Just the other night, Amy and I were watching our show now (*So You Think You Can Dance*). I felt bad, one of the couples was supposed to dance the Cha Cha and it was obvious that neither of them was too comfortable with the idea. Before every dance there's a little package that shows the couple's practice; what they struggled with and what they did well.

---

<sup>1</sup> Sermon preached by the Rev. Tom Moore at Emsworth UP Church on Sunday, November 8, 2009.

When performance time came...well needless to say the dance was just short of a train wreck. Now, this wasn't due to the couple missing any of the steps, they made all the right moves – except when it came to their lifts. This dance had a lot of lifts, and every single lift looked labored, looked tentative, looked unsure of what would happen next. When the couple finished and they were standing before the judges, I leaned over to Amy and said, “She didn't trust him.” You could just tell by the look on the female dancer's face that she did not trust her male partner in lifting her; she could not give her all and make that act of faith.

In all partnerships, trust and faithfulness are necessary ingredients that help the partnership thrive. In couples dancing, trust and faithfulness are the foundation for every step, every move, every position, every lift – without trust and faithfulness the bottom drops out. In marriages and friendships, trust and faithfulness are the bedrock upon which the relationship is built. If trust and faithfulness are not present within the relationship, then the whole structure collapses in upon itself. In Christian discipleship, if trust and faithfulness are not present realities in all we say and do in our relationship with God, if Jesus is not the cornerstone of our lives as he sustains and empowers us by the power of the Holy Spirit, then our lives are like a ship lost at sea with a compass that doesn't point north.

A vital part of Christian discipleship is trust and faithfulness; not that somehow by our trust and faithfulness in God we can condition or badger God into being trustworthy and faithful to us. If that were the case we'd still be a ship lost at sea with a compass that doesn't point north. No, it's because the Lord our God has revealed himself to us in, through, and as Jesus Christ as trustworthy and faithful –penetrating into the depths of our

humanity as God-for-us, taking our sins upon himself and nailing them to the cross that our lives might be redeemed—it's in response to the Lord our God, whose trustworthiness and faithfulness is known in and through Jesus Christ, that we are called to cast aside our apprehensions and anxieties to trust in the Lord out of the depths of our very lives. It's because of who God is to us and for us that we lift our very lives as an offering to him. Yet this way of living is certainly difficult and requires a tremendous leap of faith.

We live in a world full of uncertainty. Just over a year ago, many folks thought their jobs were secure or their pensions were untouchable, only to discover that they weren't. Wars and rumors of wars rage in lands far from us, yet they impact so many on a deeply personal level. The rich seemingly get rich while the poor wallow in poverty and sickness. Senseless violence happens in places we would never assume: at a fort, in an architecture firm, and even on the highway. In a world full of so much uncertainty it becomes easy for us to draw into ourselves. We begin to hoard the things we have. We hoard our money, afraid that someone will take everything away from us. We become very guarded with our time, afraid that someone might abuse it. We even hoard our talents, afraid that we'll either be persecuted for them, or rejected. In a world of uncertainty we hold back so much, that we even go so far as to hold back from the Lord our God – the same God who has created us, called us in Christ Jesus, and blessed us with every spiritual blessing. And in holding back, we leave the ministry and mission of God in shambles, hoping that someone else will deal with it and let us continue in our anxiety and apprehensions.

It was certainly a long journey for Jesus and his disciples as they finally made their way into Jerusalem. I even wonder if the disciples weren't ready to go find a hotel room somewhere and take a load off after the many miles they had traveled on foot. But it wasn't

so for Jesus. Rather than skipping a beat, Jesus kept on doing what he was doing, enacting the Kingdom of God and proclaiming the glory of God to a world that didn't want to hear it. While he was in the temple, he took a moment to watch the treasury box. Sitting there, directly across from the box, he observed as many came and went, placing large sums of money into the treasury without even batting an eye. But then, a poor widow comes to the box, takes the last two copper coins that she has, and plops them in there. Jesus called his disciples over to him and said, "The truth is that this poor widow gave more to the collection than all the others put together. All the others gave what they'll never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn't afford—she gave her all."<sup>2</sup>

Now, I'm willing to bet that some of you hear this passage and think to yourselves, "Well here we go. Now comes the part where the pastor fumbles about talking about money and telling us to be like the poor widow who gave her last two coins. I'll bet this kid who looks like he's 16 years old is going to tell us that we should be more generous with our giving like the poor widow." I could do that and make it easy on us all, but that's not what I'm here for and that's not what this passage is really about.

Too often we look at this passage and think that Jesus is hoisting the poor widow onto a pedestal, holding her out before us as some great and grand example that we can try to emulate. But Jesus never says emulate her. He never even says that we should be like her. The problem with placing a person on a pedestal is there is too much distance between us and them; there's no way that we can see ourselves standing alongside that person. I don't think Jesus wants us to get hung up being like the poor widow and focusing solely on the aspect of giving money as an offering to support the church, or a cause, or a mission.

---

<sup>2</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, 105-6.

When approaching this passage, the question is not, how can we best emulate the poor widow and try and be like her? That won't get us anywhere. The better question is: what offering can we make?

You know, those two copper coins represent a heck of a lot more than just money in our gospel passage. As one commentator suggests, "They represent faith and belief and how these must be lived out in our lives in concrete acts and not solely by rituals that no longer hold religious power...The coins represent faith-filled offering found in presenting all of who we are and all we hope to become to God for service to the world."<sup>3</sup> In the midst of worship, we're not just taking up a collection so that we can pay our bills, pay a few salaries, and give to a few mission agencies. Sure that's a part of where the offering money goes. But what we're really doing in the midst of worship is offering up the very gift of our lives; we're offering ourselves, everything that makes up who we are in an act of faith that is in response to the faithfulness and trustworthiness God has shown to us in and through Jesus Christ.

Stewardship is so much bigger than just money and supporting our budget so that there's a building to worship within. And I don't dive into this to make you feel guilty as if all of us are all poor Christians. I raise the critical question, asking, "What offering can we make," because the answer involves our future as a congregation; and not just the future we determine but the future God has promised to us. In asking, "what offering can I make," I'm asking you to consider if we are doing the very best we can or are we just plodding along going through the motions? Are there spiritual gifts that you have that can be utilized for God's kingdom work; are there hidden talents that you've been holding back; could we

---

<sup>3</sup> Emilie M. Townes, "Mark 12:38-44: Theological Perspective" *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, volume 4 (Westminster/John Knox: Louisville, 2009), 286.

dig down a little deeper and give a little more of ourselves as an act of faith and trust that glorifies our Lord and Savior?

By now you've either received a letter from me that includes a commitment card for 2010 or you'll get one in the next few days. One key feature that you will notice is that I'm not only asking you to give out of your pocketbooks. If that's all the gospel was about then I wouldn't bother being here. What I am asking you to commit to, Emsworth UP Church, is to devote yourselves to the mission and ministry of God in our midst and in the midst of this community. In the name of Jesus Christ I am calling you to let go of your apprehensions and your anxieties, to let go of whatever it may be that is holding you back from living into the fullness of who God is calling you to be, who God is calling this church to be in this community; I'm asking you in the name of Jesus Christ to let go of whatever is keeping you from fully participating in the ministry of Jesus in this place, so that you might offer up the gift of your lives wholly for the work of Christ in the world.

That's what real stewardship is about; living our lives as a faithful offering to the Lord our God. Taking our time, our talents, and yes, even our money, and wholly dedicating them to the ministry of our living, reigning, active, and present Lord and Savior, who was crucified for us and reigns over us as Lord even now and who invites us to fling wide the doors of our lives to more fully embrace the Kingdom life and work that begins here and now. For the next two weeks, I'm asking you to prayerfully lift to God one question: What offering can we make? Praise, glory, and honor be to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; now and unto ages of ages. Amen.