

Grateful Giving

“Now thank we all our God with hearts and hands and voices, who wondrous things has done, in whom the world rejoices, who, from our mothers’ arms has blessed us on our way with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.” I love to sing that hymn, especially around the time of Thanksgiving, because it reminds me to stop and think about those countless gifts of love with which God has blessed my family and me. I’m grateful this year to have all of my family under one roof – there have been times in our life together when jobs, school situations and other contingencies kept us hundreds of miles apart for months at a time. And, of course, we’re facing that natural progression of life when our children will begin to set up their own households – sooner, perhaps than Connie and I would like. But for now, I’m blessed by living with these four other people, even if we don’t all always act like it all the time. I’m grateful to be fully employed and especially grateful to be in this place serving you all. I’m grateful for continued good health, without too much impact on my life from diabetes. I’m grateful that God has continued to bless me with opportunities to promote the arts and to have artistic outlets in my life, despite or perhaps because of my willingness to walk away from that career to enter the pastorate. I’m grateful to be living in the place that Connie and I decided was our favorite part of the country, the beautiful Puget Sound with its soft climate, even in the midst of record rainfall. I could go on and on and I hope that my listing has made you think of some of the things that you are grateful for, too.

I was curious this week as to what exactly the writer of this fine old hymn was grateful for when he wrote the original German words of which we have sung the translation. I was gratified but not really surprised to discover Martin Rinkart’s story. Rinkart was a minister in Germany during the bloody Thirty Years War that devastated Europe, and especially Germany, from 1618 to 1648. The stated reasons for the war were religious, Catholic versus Protestant, but the real issues, of course, were political power and economics. Rinkart’s native city of Eilenberg was flooded with refugees, then overrun by invading Austrians once and Swedes twice. The town also suffered from famine and pestilence. It is said that during the Plague of 1637, Rinkart was conducting forty to fifty funerals a day. He took refugees into his own home, even though he often had difficulty feeding and clothing his own family. It was at the height of the war that he wrote, “O may this bounteous God through all our life be near us, with ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us, and keep us full of grace, and guide us when perplexed, and free us from all ills in this world and the next.” Truly, Pastor Martin Rinkart knew how to give thanks to God, even when perplexed and faced with a sea of troubles.

Rinkart’s story makes an interesting contrast and comparison to the main figures in our Gospel story this morning. Like Rinkart, the scribes whom Jesus describes are learned leaders of the community. Like Rinkart, they are living in a city occupied by a foreign army. This is not a time of active war in Israel, though. For all the taxes imposed by the Romans and all the skirmishes between Roman troops and insurgents or bandits, it is possible for people to live peacefully and even to prosper. Unlike Rinkart the hymnist, who fed and clothed his family with difficulty, the scribes wear lovely long robes and are invited to banquets. Unlike Pastor Rinkart, who took refugees into his own home, Jesus tells us that the scribes “devour(ed) widows’ houses.” I couldn’t find any kind of scholarly consensus on the exact meaning of that phrase this week. But the implications are clear. Somehow, these already well-to-do community leaders are making a profit on the suffering of the most vulnerable members of their communities. They are taking advantage of the poor to keep themselves rich.

It’s very easy for us to condemn those scribes this morning. They seem like the obvious baddies in this story and nothing at all, of course, like us. We, after all, belong to a tiny congregation that is doing truly amazing things to help the low-income seniors in our community. I wish you could have seen the

astonishment from one of the Beacon Development staff this week. When Lynn Melby and I met at their office on Thursday with them and with representatives from American Baptist Homes of the West and from Environmental Works, the architect for our senior housing project, those who haven't visited with us on a Sunday morning were absolutely gobsmacked to hear that we are about 48 on an average Sunday morning. So we would certainly not seem to be part of the class of those who take advantage of the poor for our own benefit. There is another perspective we might want to take into consideration, though. Robert K. Gruse is Professor of Hebrew Scriptures at Loyola University in New Orleans. In his commentary on this passage, he points out, "we in America live so well because we import cheap goods from overseas made by people in factories who sometimes are brutally underpaid. We live well because they live poorly. We thus should identify ourselves on one level with the scribes in this passage, not the widows." We might add to that the voracious appetite for energy encouraged by the American lifestyle and how it is the poor and vulnerable who are least able to cope with the resulting pollution and depletion of resources. We need to hear the condemnation of the scribes by Jesus as a cautionary, not as a reason to feel smug.

In contrast to the scribes, Jesus directs his disciples' attention to a poor widow, perhaps one of the victims of the rapacious scribes. Like Pastor Martin Rinkart during the Thirty Years War, this woman is in dire straits, financially. There was no Social Security in Israel, no pension plans. Women did not run businesses or have professions. They could not even inherit property. A widow was totally dependent on her children or her family of origin to take her in and feed her after the death of her husband. If she had no children or surviving family, or if they were disinterested in her plight, she could beg or starve. Our psalm this morning and the wonderful old hymn that comes from it speak of those who go forth in weeping, of those who sow in tears. The widow, spotted in the Temple by Jesus, giving her whole living to the treasury, certainly knew what it was like to sow in tears.

I suspect, though, that she also knew what it was to reap in joy. Now, that may seem like a rather odd conclusion. This woman is clearly in trouble. Jesus says that those two small copper coins that she dropped into the trumpet-shaped collection box at the periphery of the Court of Women, were "ὅλον τὸν βίον αὐτῆς," all that she had to sustain her life. Nevertheless, she gave it. Why? What on earth could make her do such a thing?

By way of an answer, at least, one possible answer, I want you to hear a story I read this week. It comes from Rev. Gordon Cosby, founder and pastor of the Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. When Cosby was a young man in the years before World War II, he was minister of a small Baptist congregation near Lynchburg, Virginia. Cosby writes: "My deacon sent for me one day and told me that he wanted my help. "We have in our congregation," he said, "a widow with six children. I have looked at the records and discovered that she is putting into the treasury of the church each month \$4.00 - a tithe of her income. Of course, she is unable to do this. We want you to go and talk to her and let her know that she needs to feel no obligation whatsoever, and free her from the responsibility." I am not wise now [writes Rev. Cosby]; I was less wise then. I went and told her of the concern of the deacons. I told her as graciously and as supportively as I know how that she was relieved of the responsibility of giving. As I talked with her the tears came into her eyes. "I want to tell you," she said, "that you are taking away the last thing that gives my life dignity and meaning.""

It is important for all of us to feel we have something to offer, to those we love, to society, to God, even if it is only a little. As we enter Advent and the Christmas season in a few weeks, we will hear stories and songs that are beloved by many of us that reinforce this idea of the importance of being

Grateful Giving

able to give what little we may have to show our love for others or for God. I've mentioned before in this place that beautiful short story by O. Henry, "The Gift of the Magi," in which a poor young couple each sacrifice their most precious possession in order to afford a gift for each other. Some of you will no doubt know the lovely operetta, "Amahl and the Night Visitors," by Gian Carlo Menotti. It was the first Christmas television special to become an annual tradition, showing on NBC from 1951 until 1966. For those of you who don't know the story, the crippled boy Amahl and his widowed mother are visited by the Magi on their way to give their gifts to the baby Jesus. Learning of their quest, Amahl and his mother wish they had something to give to the baby King and Amahl offers his only possession, his crutch. Miraculously, this offering leads to his healing. And if you don't remember Amahl, perhaps you remember all those Bing Crosby Christmas specials in which Bing, later augmented by David Bowie, would sing "The Little Drummer Boy":

"I have no gift to bring, pa rum pum pum pum
That's fit to give the King, pa rum pum pum pum,
Shall I play for you, pa rum pum pum pum,
On my drum?"

For both Amahl and the little drummer boy, as well as for the widow in our Gospel story, there is a sense that they are living up to what Jesus called the first of the commandments: "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." They gave all they had to give out of love and they gave with gratitude and joy.

Perhaps they were able to do this because they realized how totally dependent they were on God for everything anyway. These people all knew that they had no power in and of themselves, no way to provide for themselves. They were all reliant on the grace of God for their very lives. And they were grateful. Of the widow in the Temple, the Lutheran pastor, Mary W. Anderson writes: "The two little coins in the woman's hand were probably all she had. The truth is -- and the extremely poor know this well -- those coins weren't going to change her life. When you've got so little, a penny or two isn't going to move you from welfare to work. She could be at peace and joyful in knowing she was able to give to the temple treasury, because with the coins or without them, she was still a dependent person. The issue is not how much we have in the bank, but what that money is for us. Is it our heart, our security, our source of power, or is it a tool for our stewardship? Are we dependent on our money to give us all we want and need from life, or are we dependent on God to make us rich? "If you follow me," Jesus teaches, "you will walk in the way of the widow. Live lives that show in everything you do and say that you are dependent on God for all you have and all you are." As good Americans we've been taught to celebrate our independence, but Jesus teaches us to celebrate our great dependence on God alone. Our culture counsels us to become like the honored scribes, but Jesus counsels us to become like the dishonored widow."

This morning, we had, as many churches do at this time of the year, a "Stewardship Moment." Now, in the church, that has come to be code for "time to make your annual pledge of giving to the work and maintenance of the church." When the pastor or a deacon or some other "pillar of the church" says the word "stewardship," all of us good churchgoers know to reach for our wallets, checkbooks or purses. But let's break the code for a minute and think about the word "Stewardship" itself. I did a Children's Story in a service in our church in Evansville a couple of years ago and I was delighted to find that, thanks to "The Lord of the Rings" movies, most of the children knew what a Steward was. A Steward, in days gone by, was someone who took care of the kingdom in the absence of the king, or who managed property for someone else. When we talk about stewardship and our financial resources, we are remembering, in the words of the Psalmist, "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." All

Grateful Giving

that we have and all that we are comes from God. We are the stewards of God's world, up to and including whatever we have in the bank. All our possessions, as well as ourselves, are to be used by us on behalf of God. The Rev. Dr. Francis Wade, who was rector of St. Albans Episcopal Church on the grounds of the National Cathedral in Washington, wrote: "The wealth of our households is not ours in any permanent sense. It passes through us. It can be said that we own our individuality, our principles, and our character for we shape these things, and they will cease on the day we die. But our money existed before we did and will continue after us. It passes through us. We manage it. We do not own it. It's like owning a parcel of land with a river running through it. You can own the land but not the river. That's the way our money is, and that's why we are called stewards. And what we do with our resources is called stewardship. We are to manage them in the interest of God."

Paulinus of Nola was a Christian poet, teacher and bishop at the end of the fourth century and beginning of the fifth in what is now France and Spain. He also wrote on the understanding of stewardship, on being "entrusted with the administration and use of temporal wealth for the common good, not with the everlasting ownership of private property." Paulinus held up the widow in the Temple as an exemplar of this type of stewardship. She gave all she had towards God's work through the Temple, as a good steward does, returning what is God's to God.

I have one other reason to believe that the widow gave those two little coins that day out of joy and gratitude and it is a deeply personal reason. There have been times in our married life together when Connie and I have been dead broke. Ask Connie some time about our first Christmas together. We would have been glad, like Jim and Della in O. Henry's story, to have had a pocket watch and luxurious hair to sell on each other's behalf. During my first year in seminary, I who had a degree from one of the most highly competitive universities in the country was privileged to stand in line for government cheese and baby formula with folks I would have earlier considered beneath my station. It was very good for me. It taught me a lot about compassion and humility. Needless to say, once we paid our rent and bought our groceries and put gas in the car, there wasn't anything left over to put in the plate on Sunday. Again, this flew in the face of all I thought was important. I'd been brought up with tithing, giving at least 10% of whatever I earned, as the standard of Christian stewardship. Not being able to give made me feel terrible. But I learned two more important things. First of all, I learned again, and not for the last time, that we live not under the law but by the grace of God. After a fair amount of suffering, I realized that, 10%, 1% or 0%, God loved me without reservation. Second, I learned what a joy it is to give to God's work, whether through the church or through another ministry or directly to those in need. Relieved of the compulsion to give according to the Law of my own religious expectations, I discovered the joy of giving out of gratitude, a sense of stewardship and a simple love of God, my rock and my redeemer. I still backslide sometimes, into that more legalistic approach, but I know God forgives me and I'm pretty sure that Connie does too. And that's why when I read this story, I envision the widow dropping her coins into the slot with a big smile on her face.

"Come, ye thankful people, come, raise the song of harvest home." We will celebrate Thanksgiving this week in our homes or together with other members of our extended families in their homes. It's the closest thing we Americans have to a harvest festival in this day of urban and suburban living and separation from farms and fields. Still, we have much to be thankful for and it is good for us to pause and give thanks to God for the harvests in our life, for the financial, physical and spiritual gifts which come to us from our loving Parent and Creator. As we celebrate this week, as we eat too much turkey and dressing and sink, gratefully, into our easy chairs in front of the football games with our pumpkin pie, let me suggest that we keep in mind the widow and her two coins. Not out of any sort of guilt

Grateful Giving

about what we have and she didn't but instead reflecting on what she had and I hope we do, too: A sense of our dependence on God's grace; a sense of what it means to truly be stewards in God's kingdom; and a sense that, unlike the scribes, we can be truly grateful, generous and joyous as we give out of our abundance to the assistance of our brothers and sisters and to the glory of God. Amen.