

Pentecost 23 – Proper 27B (11/8/09 – Real Stewardship)

In the Name JESUS. [Amen]

The two poor widows in our appointed readings for this **23rd Sunday after Pentecost** – the **Third Last Sunday in the Church Year** – really put us to shame. The widow of Zarephath puts us to shame because of her hospitality despite her poverty ... and her trust in the word of the prophet of God, Elijah. Imagine yourself in her shoes, if you can – it’s not all that easy. She’s a widow ... with no real means of support. Clearly her son is too young to provide for her. There’s a drought and a famine thanks to wicked King Ahab and his more-wicked-still wife, Jezebel ... and all of Israel who did not refuse such an idolatrous pair of rulers – God had to punish the people ... discipline them so that they might come to fear, love, and trust in Him above all things. This widow is gathering a few sticks – not logs, mind you, for the fire, but just **a couple of sticks** – so that she **may go in and prepare [a handful of flour ... and a little oil] for [her]self and [her] son, that [they] may eat it and die** [1KGS 17.12]. That’s all she has – for herself and her son. It won’t take a big fire to make that “death row” meal – if you can call it a meal at all. One small bread – little more than a muffin. That’s all she has in the world to feed her family. She lost her husband some time ago. Now she and her son are going to die of starvation as well.

But first, at the command of this man of God – this prophet of the LORD – she does as Elijah says. She goes and first makes Elijah a little cake of bread. Then she makes some for her son and herself. And she keeps on making bread ... day after day! **For thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, “The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain upon the earth.”** [1KGS 17.14]. **And she and [Elijah] and her household ate for many days. The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD that He spoke by Elijah.** [17.15-16] Now I ask you, as I asked myself: if you were in her situation – no means of income ... starving ... down to your last little bit of flour and oil ... your last, horribly skimpy meal – would you give it to a stranger ... a foreigner no less? Or would you hoard it for your family and yourself? Where is **your** faith in God’s gracious provision? Do **you** trust that He will provide all you need for this body and life? In our current economy? Even in the worst of situations?

The poor widow in our *Holy Gospel* for today likewise puts us to shame

with regard to her stewardship – her giving to the Lord and His Church. Oh, lots of people put more into the coffers. She ***came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny*** [MK 12.42]. Two half-pennies are all she has. But she will not neglect her giving to the Lord. She will not rob God of His rightful tithe and offerings [MAL 3.8]. She puts to shame the Scribes and Pharisees and rich alike ... and she puts us to shame. Jesus says so: ***Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.*** [12.43-44] How is your tithe – your 10% – going? Are you giving any offerings – **more** than 10% – to the Lord and the work of the Gospel here? Do you hold back when times are tight? Do you wait for a better – less rainy – day? And thereby act as if your well-being were up to **you** ... and that what you have is your own and **not** the Lord's?

That's what our sinful flesh does. We are probably more often like one of those scribes we heard about in the first part of our *Gospel Lesson*. Cultivating an outward show of piety. Seeking greetings and honor and worldly renown by what we do and say and give. And did you catch that last little part Jesus said about the scribes? ***They will receive greater condemnation.*** [12.40b] As Jesus says in another place: ***Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.*** [LK 12.48] When the Lord blesses you with much – whether it be great faith, great knowledge, great wealth, great health, great wisdom, or whatever greater skill – He expects much more from you. Are you squandering your wealth, health, wisdom, talents, and time? Are you using them only for yourself instead of in service to the Lord? After all, as we heard just recently in Jesus' conversation with the rich young man: ***Go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven*** [MK 10.21]. And as St. Paul says in ROMANS 12[1-2]: ***present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.***

All that we are and have – whether much or little – belongs to the Lord. It is merely on loan to us. We are but **stewards** of His gracious gifts. We must use them according to His command, will, and good pleasure – in faith toward God and in fervent love toward one another.

It is the Gospel – and only the Gospel – that frees us to be good stewards and to give and love like that. Oh, we can tell our flesh what it must do – discipline ourselves. But in the end, the true power for stewardship of our time and talent and treasures comes from God – through His Gospel-Word. It is in seeing our merciful God graciously at work to sustain that foreign widow and her son – as well as Elijah – in the midst of a terrible famine that we are encouraged and assured that God will indeed provide for us.

But beyond that – for God also graciously sends His sun and rain also upon the wicked – beyond that, we are sustained in this life by the great and blessed truth we heard in the *Alleluia-Verse* as we began to hear the *Holy Gospel* for today. In 2COR 8.9 we heard this wondrous truth: ***You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you by His poverty might become rich.*** St. Paul is talking about real poverty, real riches, and ***Real Stewardship***. He is talking about our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, the very Son of God, leaving His riches and power and glory in heaven ... to descend to our sin-impooverished world. He is talking about the eternal, immortal, divinity taking into Himself the weakness of our human flesh through the Virgin Mary to become Man. He is talking about the Son of God becoming incarnate and born in poverty in a stable ... to live in poverty and die forsaken – for us and for our salvation. He is talking about the Lord Jesus using every moment of His time, every aspect of His abilities and talents, and every bit of His treasures – including and especially Himself – as a ***Real Steward*** of all He has and is to bring forgiveness, life, and salvation to His fallen world ... to you and to me.

And because of Christ's ***Real Stewardship***, we are now like that widow and son of Zarephath – hearing the Word of God's gracious promises through the mouth of those He graciously sends to us to proclaim His Good News. And likewise God provides for us, even (and especially) in the midst of adversity. We are now like the poor widow in our *Gospel* – God creates and sustains in us faith that trusts He will provide for all our needs in body and soul. And freed from our sins – freed from the burden of trying to create a mere façade of godliness to receive the greetings, honor, and accolades of the world – we are free to serve God and neighbor in thanksgiving for all of Christ's ***Real Stewardship*** on our behalf. We are free to give all that we have and all that we are for the benefit of those God places in our lives –

because Christ has already given us all He is and has ... His very life ... for the life of the world.

Rather than putting on long robes of our own poor piety [MK 12.38], we are clothed in the very rich robe of Christ's own righteousness. For the Son of God was willingly stripped of all His majesty, glory, and power – that in His weakness and humiliation and nakedness on the Cross, He might win for us the truly glorious wedding garment of His holiness ... in order that we may enter His Wedding Banquet and not be cast out. Rather than seeking fleeting *greetings in the marketplaces* [12.38], we have received **already** in Christ the blessed and enduring – and infinitely rich and warm – welcome of God the Father. Who needs the acclaim of men when we have the commendation of God? Rather than hungering for *the places of honor at [mere, worldly] feasts* [12.39], we are graciously **given** a place at the Table of our Lord here ... and will have a place at the heavenly, eternal Wedding Feast that is to come. Who needs to covet after the homes of others when we *shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever* [PSA 23]? Rather than the *pretense* of our own *long prayers* [12.40], we have the prayer of our Lord Jesus Christ on the night He was betrayed: *Holy Father, keep them in Your Name, which You have given Me, that they may be one, even as We are one* [JN 17.11] ... and His gracious supplication as He hung, crucified for the sins of the whole world, upon the Cross: *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do* [LK 23.34].

Here, then, is *Real Stewardship* – *Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer Himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then He would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, He has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.* [HEB 9.24-26] Because of Christ's stewardship, our stewardship – poor, weak, haphazard, and riddled with sin though it be – is sanctified. Because Christ has always been and remains faithful in His stewardship, we shall be delivered whole to the Father ... for life everlasting. For *Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time ... to save those – US – who are eagerly waiting for Him* [9.28].

In the Name of the FATHER and of the ✠ SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT. [Amen]