

GIVING TO GOD...
In Difficult Economic Times

1 Kings 17:1-16
Matthew 6:19-21, 25-33
2 Corinthians 8:1-5; 9:6-11

A Sermon Preached by Pastor Rob Fulton
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Now, let's be honest about it, shall we? This is a really LOUSY time to be having a stewardship campaign, wouldn't you agree? I mean, REALLY! Here we are in the midst of stewardship season...TRYING to focus our attention on our giving to God through our gifts to the church...while at the SAME time we CONTINUE to be smack dab in the middle of what many economic experts tell us is the worst financial downturn since the Great Depression. But then again, we don't need the economic experts to TELL us that either, do we? A shopping trip to WalMart or Kroger will tell us that prices are skyrocketing at the same time that real wages are declining...or staying flat at best. A quick drive around town to see how many houses are for sale and not selling will easily show how bad the real estate market CONTINUES to be these days. Unemployment CONTINUES to hover above 9% and the stock market is on a roller coaster, doing all kinds of wild and crazy gyrations depending on what IS happening with the financial crisis in Europe...and what's NOT happening with the financial crisis in Congress. And while the Dow Jones Industrial Average was up nearly 222 points at mid-day on Friday...the stock market is STILL more than 2,000 points below its 14,000 point high of 2007 and uncertainty CONTINUES to rule in many people's financial worlds. Granted, the Social Security Administration DID declare a 3.6% cost of living adjustment for 2012 which will surely be GOOD NEWS to those who depend on Social Security to put a roof over their heads and bread on their tables. But STILL many other wage earners HAVEN'T received increases and are simply glad to even HAVE a job...wage increases or not!

Needless to say, of course, we are in the midst of some economic woes the likes of which we have not seen in several generations. And while it is certainly not as bad as the Great Depression of the last century, the economic experts and news analysts have taken to calling this period of difficult economic times through which we're currently going *The Great Recession*. The only bright spot in the midst of it all is that gasoline prices have gone down CONSIDERABLY in recent months! But watch out!! No doubt, the oil companies know we'll soon be going "*over the river and through the woods to Grandmother's house*" and will SURELY make the price of filling up at the pump soar before the Thanksgiving/ Christmas holiday season! Is it just me, or has all this news of economic woe put us ALL into a blue funk lately?

And yet, here we are...here we are...trying to run a STEWARDSHIP campaign for goodness sake...trying to raise MONEY for the church...asking people to GIVE...to give to the work of God...to PLEDGE...to continue giving what they have been giving if they can...and to INCREASE their giving if that is possible...so that we can CONTINUE to try and do the Lord's work and work the Lord's will in this time and in this place. Right now, however, is simply NOT the best time to be asking people for money. In fact, it may be the very WORST time to be asking people for money. And to be perfectly honest with you, standing up here inviting you and encouraging you to support the work of the church by maintaining or even increasing your tithes and offerings is simply NOT a very comfortable thing for me to do...ESPECIALLY when I know that the biggest portion of the church's budget goes to pay MY salary. Surely it must sound like a brazen, daring, audacious request to make in the midst of such challenging economic times – at least it sounds that way to ME...and I'm the one standing up here encouraging you to give.

But lest we think we are the ONLY ones to have ever been in this position, I want us to turn our attention to the scriptures...to two stories of economically tough times when God's people were

ALSO encouraged to support God's work in spite of their economic woes. And I want to sandwich those two stories around some words of Jesus that I think you will find very familiar...but which we need to be reminded of constantly...at least I need to be reminded of them and maybe you do too!

1 Kings 17:1-16
Matthew 6:19-21, 25-33
2 Corinthians 8:1-5; 9:6-8, 10-11

Leader: Those who have ears to hear, let them hear – for this is the Word of the Lord!

People: Thanks be to God!

Now, of all the brazen, daring, audacious request made by God to His people in the Bible, one of the MOST brazen...the MOST daring...the MOST audacious, it seems to me, is the request God made through His prophet Elijah to the Widow of Zarephath...a widow who, because of the drought in the land of Israel, was facing EXTREME financial difficulty, and was, in fact, about to starve to death...both she and her son. And yet, in spite of her dire economic situation, God sends Elijah to this woman none-the-less to request...no to DEMAND from her...both water to drink and bread to eat, even though, for all intents and purposes, she had little, if anything, to spare.

Remember the story with me if you will. The land of Israel is being ruled by King Ahab who ruled over Israel for twenty-two years. But as the book of 1st Kings tells us:

King Ahab sinned against the Lord more than any of his predecessors. It was not enough for him to sin like King Jeroboam. He went further and married Jezebel, the daughter of King Ethba-al of Sidon, who worshiped the false god Ba-al. Ahab built a temple to Ba-al in Samaria and made an altar and put it in the temple. He also put up an image of the goddess Asherah. He did more to arouse the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel than all the kings of Israel before him. 1 Kings 16:29-33

So God sent His prophet Elijah from Tishbe in Gilead to King Ahab to announce to him that as a punishment for his sinfulness there would be no rain upon the land for three years. And so the skies over Israel dried up and stayed dry. Which meant, to be sure, the financial and monetary collapse of an economy based almost entirely on agriculture which, of course, needed rain to survive.

In addition to the drought, of course, there also came a famine. No rain...no crops. And the population was on the verge of starving to death. Even God's prophet Elijah had to be fed by the ravens who brought food to Elijah at God's command.

But then God ordered Elijah to go to Zarephath and look for a widow whom God would command to feed him. Upon seeing a woman gathering firewood by the town gates, Elijah said to her, "*Woman, bring me a little water that I may have something to drink.*" Well, Elijah was no dummy! He knew as well as anybody that water was in mighty short supply. No one had any to spare, especially for a stranger who happened to wander into town. And yet, in those days and in that culture, the stranger was exactly the one who got the best of what a person had to offer, even if it meant that the person had to go without.

But then, as the woman was going to fetch the water jug, Elijah made ANOTHER request, this one even MORE preposterous than the first: "*And while you're at it, bring me some BREAD to eat as well!*"

Well, with that the woman simply HAD to protest. Water was one thing...she could manage that, even as scarce as water was during the drought. But BREAD was an entirely different matter.

"By the living Lord, Your God, I swear I don't HAVE any bread," she said. "All I have is a handful of flour in a bowl and a little bit of oil in a jar. I came here today to gather some firewood in order to prepare what little I have left for my son and me. Undoubtedly

this will be our last meal and then we shall surely starve to death.”

It was a PITIFUL situation, to say the least. Like everyone else in the midst of those difficult economic times, the widow had little or NOTHING to spare. And yet, here was Elijah, a prophet of God, God’s agent on earth, asking...no DEMANDING, according to how some translations put it...that this poor widow give up what little bit she and her son had left so that Elijah himself could eat. It was a brazen, audacious request if there ever was one.

Oh, but the really PREPOSTEROUS request was still to come! Listen:

“Don’t worry!” Elijah told the woman. “Go and prepare your meal. But FIRST make a small loaf from what you have and bring it to me. And then... THEN prepare what is left over for you and your son. For this is what the Lord God of Israel says: (And this is the part I want you to listen to and listen well!) “The bowl will not run out of flour nor the jar run out of oil before the day when I, the Lord, send rain upon the land!”

“So the widow went and did as Elijah had told her, and all of them... ALL of them...had enough food for many days. As the Lord had promised through Elijah, the bowl did not run out of flour nor did the jar run out of oil until the Lord sent rain upon the land.”

What we have here, you see, not only for the Widow of Zarephath, but for us as well...ALL of us who are in the midst of some troubling economic times...is a lesson in FAITH...a lesson in TRUST...a lesson in putting GOD and GOD’S concerns FIRST in our lives. But then, that sounds a whole lot like what Jesus SAID to do, now doesn’t it?

“This is why I tell you, don’t worry about food and drink and what you need to stay alive...or about clothes for your body. God knows you need all those things. So instead of worrying about where your next meal will come from or where you’re going to get your next new outfit of clothes, be concerned about God and what GOD wants from you. Put GOD first in your life and God will provide you with ALL you really need.” Matthew 6:25-33

“So the widow went and DID as Elijah had told her. And ALL of them ate for many days. For as the Lord had promised, the bowl did not run out of flour nor did the jar run out of oil for as long as the drought lasted.

Almost a thousand years later, in the early days of the Christian church, times were tough then too. Persecution, resentment, prejudice, discrimination, economic difficulty – they were ALL part of what those early followers of Christ had to face, not only from the Roman Empire within which they lived, giving their loyalty to a Lord FAR greater than Caesar...but also from the Jews who constantly resented what was seen by many to be little more an upstart, rebellious, defiant movement within Judaism. And yet, Paul singles out one group in particular...one group that had faced tremendous financial challenges and woes...the Macedonian Christians...and he talks about how, even in the MIDST of their struggles and difficulties...their challenges and economic woes...they opened their hearts...they opened their wallets...they opened their pocketbooks...and they gave generously to the work of God. Listen again to what Paul wrote:

I want you to know, brothers and sisters, what God’s grace has accomplished in the churches of Macedonia. They have been severely tested by the troubles they have gone through. But their joy is so great that they have been EXTREMELY GENEROUS in their giving, even though they were very poor. I can assure you they gave as much as they could, and even MORE than they could. Of their OWN FREE WILL, they begged and PLEADED for the privilege of having a part in helping God’s people in need. I tell you, it was MORE than we could have ever hoped for! FIRST they gave themselves to the Lord...and then, by God’s will, they gave of themselves to us as well! 2 Cor. 8:1-5

Now, I ask you, when was the last time any of US...especially ME... BEGGED...PLEADED for the privilege of giving to God's work in the world – whether out of our abundance...or out of our poverty? What was the key to it all for those Macedonian Christians? Paul tells us: Even though they had been severely tested...even though they were very poor...even though they certainly knew the reality of economic uncertainty and financial woes...they begged...they pleaded for the privilege...the PRIVILEGE of giving. How did they DO it? *“FIRST, they gave themselves to the Lord!”* Paul said. *“FIRST, they gave themselves to the Lord, and then... THEN... they gave themselves to the needs of God's people!”*

And what was it Jesus said again?

“Seek FIRST the Kingdom of God!” “Put God FIRST in your life... and God will provide you with ALL you really need.

But then Paul goes on as well...offering his readers then...and NOW ...some very logical, practical advice:

*Remember then, that the person who plants few seeds will have a small crop.
But the one that plants many seeds will have a large crop.*

Now, that makes sense, doesn't it?! Nothing earth shattering there, is it? AH! But listen to the conclusion Paul draws from that very logical, practical advice:

*Each of you should GIVE then, as YOU have decided, NOT with regret...
NOT out of a sense of duty...NOT out of guilt... NOT out of obligation...
but because you WANT to...because you want to join God in God's
work in the world. For God loves the one who gives gladly.
God LOVES the one who gives GLADLY!*

And then listen to what Paul says next, because this is my favorite part...especially for those of us who, like his original audience some two thousand years ago, are living in some pretty scary and intimidating financial times. Paul writes:

*“And God is able to give you MORE than you need, so that you will ALWAYS have all
that you need for yourself and MORE than enough for every good cause.
And God, who supplies seed for the sower and bread to eat, will ALSO supply you
with all the seed you need and will make it grow and produce a rich harvest
from your generosity.*

The key to it all, it seems to me...the KEY to putting Paul's words into practice...whether it is for Paul...FOR Paul's readers long ago...or for us today...for ANY of us who are contemplating how we are going to give to God in the midst of these turbulent financial times – I'm thoroughly convinced...is in what JESUS said:

*Seek FIRST the Kingdom of God!” Jesus said. “Put God FIRST
in your life... and God will provide you with ALL you really need.*

Oh, if only we could BELIEVE that! If only we WOULD believe that!

Those who have ears to hear, let them hear! For this, good friends, is the Word of the Lord!
Thanks be to God!

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