

29th Sun Ord Time/Year C/Children's Sabbath
October 20, 2019
Psalm 119; Jeremiah 1:27-34; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8
Stewardship Sermon Series "Sharing God's Gifts" (One of Five)
"Conscience Consumption"

Introduction:

Luke 18:1-8 The Message (MSG)--The Story of the Persistent Widow

18 1-3 Jesus told them a story showing that it was necessary for them to pray consistently and never quit. He said, "There was once a judge in some city who never gave God a thought and cared nothing for people. A widow in that city kept after him: 'My rights are being violated. Protect me!'

4-5 "He never gave her the time of day. But after this went on and on he said to himself, 'I care nothing what God thinks, even less what people think. But because this widow won't quit badgering me, I'd better do something and see that she gets justice—otherwise I'm going to end up beaten black-and-blue by her pounding.'"

6-8 Then the Master said, "Do you hear what that judge, corrupt as he is, is saying? So what makes you think God won't step in and work justice for his chosen people, who continue to cry out for help? Won't he stick up for them? I assure you, he will. He will not drag his feet. But how much of that kind of persistent faith will the Son of Man find on the earth when he returns?"

The Word of the Lord. ***Thanks be to God!***

The theme today of being consumers who are conscience of how we live is one that reminds me of a song by Jack Johnson from his Curious George album a few years back. He did the sound track for the movie, and it is a Wesberry family favorite. The song is "The 3 Rs."

Three it's a magic number
 Yes it is, it's a magic number
 Because two times three is six
 And three times six is eighteen
 And the eighteenth letter in the alphabet is R
 We've got three R's we're going to talk about today
 We've got to learn to:
 Reduce, Reuse, Recycle

Reduce, Reuse, Recycle. This idea of reduce, reuse, and recycle usually relates to things like how we use water and electricity and how we handle our garbage, right? Reduce what we use, focusing only on

what we need. That is a conscience choice. Similar to that, we re-use things, such as those plastic lunch meat containers that we have 347 of in our kitchen that are perfect for left-overs or to take banana pudding to a neighbor. Recycling is not a new thing for us, but it does require a little conscience thought and action to make happen.

We could say about the story from Jesus today about the persistent widow that she is really good at recycling—not aluminum cans and newspapers—but prayers! Jesus tells a story about this amazing woman to his friends hoping that they will pray more often and more fervently. Prayer is something that Jesus wants those who follow him to do because it is good and wise and one way we express consciously our choice to consume things that are holy. What about this woman in his story?

She is a widow. A widow much like a little child in our culture today is very vulnerable, dependent on her family or her community to take care of her. A widow is someone whose husband has died. I cannot imagine how hard her life must be. I am sure she prays with a lot of energy and hope. Do you and I pray that way?

Then Jesus introduces us to a judge who does not sound like a great man. The widow pounds and pounds on his door to get some help, but he keeps putting her off. She will not give up. She keeps at it until finally the judge changes his mind to help. He decides to make justice happen for the widow. He is impressed by her conscience choice not to give up!

Then Jesus puts a question in the laps of the disciples that is so good. Do you remember it? He's just told them about a judge who isn't the greatest, who finally decides to work for justice. Then he asks, "Don't you think God will step in when people cry for help, to give them justice? Will the Son of Man find the kind of persistent faith the widow shows when he returns to earth?"

I imagine Jesus looking Peter and John right in the eyes when he says this, and their looking back at him and saying a resounds, "Yes! Yes, Jesus God will help, and we want to pray and act like that widow!"

Today is our kick-off to talk about stewardship for a few weeks. Stewardship is simply praying and acting like that widow. Ideally the action of giving--be it money or a few hours of our time volunteering for some worthy cause or developing our spiritual gifts (such as practicing music)--comes from prayer. Prayer helps us to figure out how best to be a steward. To say it another way, when we pray, daily, regularly, asking and listening, meditating and all that, we show God that we want to be good stewards. We want to make wise choices. We want to be generous with our things (our money and belongings). We want to practice conscious consumption.

In the book *Beyond the Offering Plate* by Adam Copeland says that so often when we talk about stewardship in the church we use these two words: "I'm sorry." The pastor stands up and says, "I'm sorry to have to do it, but it is time to talk about money today." And the congregation groans. The chairwoman of Finance makes an announcement, "I'm sorry to report that we are running behind on the budget, and we need you to help us out." I'm sorry for this and I'm sorry for that. It drains the life out of faith, doesn't it?

Jesus doesn't say, "I'm sorry" when he talks about how to be a disciple. "I'm sorry but you have to take up your cross and follow me." He doesn't say that. Neither does he say, "I'm sorry for asking you to give everything away to follow me." Nope. Not in my Bible. How about yours? I bet Jesus overhears his friends talking about who is better than another, who prays more creatively, and who God likes more. Then he tells them a story about a poor widow who just won't give up trying. She is tenacious, resilient, and faithful. She is tough and daring and prays, and prays, and prays. Jesus doesn't give a guilt trip or attempt to shame anybody into praying more. He inspires, and he doesn't say, "I'm sorry." (Introduction, pages xi-xiii).

With the release of the recent *Downton Abbey* movie, I had the chance to observe one of the characters Mr. Carson. He is officially a Butler in the show/movie, and a Butler in many ways is a very important steward for a house that is not his. The house Mr. Carson lives in and cares for is an enormous mansion. If the widow in Jesus' story is persistent in prayer, Mr. Carson is persistent in respect. He loves and respects the owners of the house, Lord and Lady Grantham. He cares a great deal when he cleans the old house. He treasures the stories about it, its history, and its contents (the antiques and items). He delights in the responsibility to manage, to steward and does so with respect. Mr. Carson is a very conscience person.

Often when we gather in worship, we give thanks to God for God's grace in the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. When we mark someone with water, we announce God's claim upon their lives, that God creates that one and will be with him/her forever, that once God loves, God never stops loving, and that the church exists to help people live into that mark of being baptized.

We share the bread of grace and the fruit of the vine at our Lord's Table regularly to give us the opportunity to think about all the ways God's love shapes us. But more than that the Lord's Supper helps little ones and older ones act out the grace of Jesus. We don't just pray for justice, we make justice happen by including all God's people around the table in Jesus' name. Together we are conscience consumers of the elements.

I want to close today's sermon with a true story told to me by Rev. Jim Lowry, aka "Papa Jim." It is one for all God's children and probably one of my favorite stewardship stories. Once there was a sweet older lady, a widow named, Lenny Penny who attended the Brick Presbyterian Church. You would think that a woman named Lenny would avoid marrying a man named Penny?

Each year, Lenny would bake these huge chocolate chip cookies for VBS. It was the snack of all snacks, and for a 6 year old child, these cookies were like 3 meals! They were loaded with flour, butter, sugar, and chocolate chips, but the main ingredient was grace. You can imagine the squeals that would erupt from children when they saw Ms. Lenny's cookies!

As Papa Jim tells it, Lenny lived alone, and she lived on her Social Security check. First Sunday after the check came in the mail, ten percent of it went in the offering plate at Old Brick Church. If you knew to listen when Lenny put in her offering you could hear the angels singing.

On real cold days, though, her Deacons would stop by to visit Lenny. Everybody at Old Brick Church had a deacon so stopping by was not seen as unusual...you know...just happen by to visit...to visit and to be sure her house was warm. Sometimes when Lenny was at Circle meeting the deacons would have the oil company go by on the q.t. and add a few gallons of fuel oil to her tank...never fill it up...she's be onto that...just add a few gallons.

Of course, it didn't make sense...no sense at all for Lenny to be putting ten percent of her Social Security check into the offering plate and for the deacons to take money out of the offering plate to buy fuel oil for Lenny...

that makes no sense at all; except, of course, in the strange economy of the Kingdom of God, it made perfect sense.

In the economy of the Kingdom of God, we all take more out of the offering plate than we put in. For Lenny, it was in giving that she savored the true taste of grace. Late one Spring the Bible School Committee asked me to go by Lenny's home and tell her we were counting on her chocolate chip cookies again that year.

They also wanted me to tell her they had some money in their budget for such things and they would be glad to buy the ingredients if Lenny would bake the cookies. That made sense to me. The Bible School was growing. They were expecting 150 to 200 children plus teachers and helpers. It takes a lot of groceries to make chocolate chip cookies for 150 to 200 children plus teachers and helpers especially since there was nothing dainty about Lenny's chocolate chip cookies which were ginormous!

"Lenny," I said as I settled in her goose neck rocker with the upholstery worn shiny, "Bible School is coming up in a few weeks."

Before I could say another word, Lenny blurted out, "I know, and I know what you're going to ask...I'm way ahead of you, preacher. You want me to bake cookies again this year for the last day of Bible School. I hear they're expecting 150 to 200 children this year, so I've been buying a little extra flour and sugar along each month, and I've been saving for the butter, eggs

and chocolate chips. "When exactly did you say Bible School is?"

I knew enough to listen for such sounds of the heart, so I heard the angels beginning to vocalize. With the sound of angels singing whirling all about,

I kept my peace. I didn't deliver my message...not my whole message. I left out the part about the church paying for the ingredients. To have robbed her of giving would have robbed her of the taste of grace and would likely have rendered the cookies tasteless.

"I declare, Lenny, you are way ahead of me. Bible School is in three weeks and I believe to my soul your chocolate chip cookies are the best part of Bible School." (Source: from the sermon "Macedonians" by Rev. J. Lowry).

The church is a more beautiful place because of the persistence, the prayers, the giving, and the grace of widows such as Ms. Lenny Penny. Will you and I join in in Jesus' name, so that when the Son of Man returns, he just might say, "I've seen your kind before, and I like it!"?

To God the glory. Amen.