

*All You Can*

Psalm 24, Luke 21: 1-4

Whitefish UMC

Consecration Sunday, October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2010

- † On this last Sunday of our stewardship and mission focus for October, I want to share with you the gift of some southern humor about a topic that makes most people nervous and uncomfortable: tithing. When I was in seminary, I worked with a young man who grew up in the south, and he loved particular southern authors, including Phillip Gulley, Clyde Edgerton, and Ferrol Sams.
- † Today we will consider a story by Ferrol Sams, a gifted observer of southern life, especially of the small town and rural variety. In his 1987 book of short stories, The Widow's Mite, he tells the story of a young Georgia woman whose husband was killed in a tragic accident.
- † This woman was raised as a good Baptist (and she doesn't have much good to say about Methodists, by the way—they were too hoity-toity for her—my friend told me that in the south, folks said that Methodists were just Baptists who could read—he had grown up Episcopalian, and they didn't think too highly of Methodists either—too common, I guess. He did become a wonderful Methodist pastor, though).
- † This young Baptist widow knew all about tithing. She says: “It is easy enough to give that tenth when you're making ten or twenty dollars a month, and if some emergency comes up and you're too sick to go to church on Sunday, you can always skip the tithe with a clear conscience – that is, if you're really sick and have been under a doctor and not just laying out

because you didn't get your hair set or something like that. Even Jesus don't expect you to pay for something you don't get. When you have a heap of money though, it makes you sing a different tune and do some real serious soul searching."

- † As a result of her husband's accidental death, this woman came into some serious money--\$125,000. When the word got around town about her windfall, the preacher from her church, the First Baptist Church of Faceville, Georgia, came calling. Baptist preachers were known to come calling when someone came into money. His intent, which she knew quite well, was to get her to tithe on her largesse, because that would be \$12,500 for the church.
- † Now this woman had great native intelligence, even though she was not formally educated. She proceeded to school the minister on what the amount was on which she actually should pay her tithe. Essentially, she started itemizing her deductions. By her logic, for example, she should not pay on the double indemnity clause or the funeral expenses or the new house she was going to build, and so on.
- † By the time she finished, she had the bottom line at \$12,569. And magnanimously, she offered to pay a tithe of \$1,257 on it. Although she certainly accepted the principle of tithing, her reckoning stands in stark contrast to the widow in Jesus' story in Luke. Jesus had been teaching in the Temple and watched the richest citizens of Jerusalem line up to contribute to the upkeep of the Temple.
- † From Luke's perspective, Jesus was not so concerned with whether these wealthy people gave a lot of money or not so much. He cared more about their intent in giving, whether they gave from their abundance and their love for God or not. It would be like seeing Tim Blixeth give \$100,000 to the

United Way. That is a lot of money; that's certainly a lot more than most of us could give. Yet in comparison to Tim Blixeth's total wealth, even in his comparatively dire financial straits, it is not so much.

- † So Jesus drew attention to this widow. She had no family to help her. She had no great store of wealth from which to draw. Still, she gave all she had—even though it was what the King James Version called only two mites—to the work of God.
- † Now a little Methodist history is in order—despite the young Baptist widow's opinion of Methodists. On the screen is a wonderful artistic depiction of John Wesley's three-part formula for Christian stewardship.
- † Marianne Niesen, pastor at St. Paul's UMC in Helena, summarizes Wesley's formula well: “Wesley, you remember, is the father of Methodism. He preached and taught throughout England during the 18th century. It was a time of tremendous social upheaval. There were issues of poverty, health care, oppressive working conditions. The slave trade was lucrative, alcoholism was rampant, child labor profitable. The industrial revolution brought ever increasing divides between the wealthy and the poor. Education was not widely accessible. Debts piled up and those who could not pay were thrown in debtors prisons until they could pay, which of course only perpetuated a cycle of poverty and despair.
- † The scene was ripe for a social revolution. Instead, historians suggest that England was saved a blood-letting through the religious revival led by none other than John Wesley who brought a message and ministry of hope and practical piety to an often hopeless situation. Obviously that is a very light and brief overview of a complex situation but it is important to know at least that much to appreciate both the simplicity and power of Wesley's ‘method.’

- † He spoke to the masses - and people came, rich and poor alike, some hungry for food and all needing hope. He preached in outdoor venues because the pulpits of the church were denied him. (The reasons for that would be the subject of another sermon!) And in his preaching, he challenged people - regardless of social status or means - to be good, to live faithful and generous lives. In a world fraught with economic challenges, he preached a simple message: Earn all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can away.
- † To 21st century American ears, that sounds like - work as hard as you can to make as much money as possible, put lots away for retirement and give as much as you can after that to a good cause. But those who study Wesley tell a different story. His three part formula is not about financial planning. It is about a way of life - which is fundamentally what ‘stewardship’ means (it is about how we live).
- † His formula is about a way of life rooted in the good news of Jesus. And it offered challenge to the well-off, comfort to the down-and-out, security for the struggling and hope for all. But, most of all, it was practical, doable. Step-by-step, Wesley said life can be better and you will truly follow Jesus if you just earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can away.”
- † It wasn’t always like that for John, though. It took him awhile to figure this stewardship thing out. It may surprise you to know that eventually John Wesley was one of the highest earning preachers of all time. In today’s dollars, he earned the equivalent of \$1.4 million in his best year. He was what we would call a workaholic, and he earned money from donations, speaking, books, and what were called “penny tracts.”
- † John grew up poor and even saw his father, Samuel, thrown into debtor’s prison. But John ended up doing well financially. When he was appointed a

fellow at Lincoln College in Oxford, he earned 30 pounds a year, which was more than enough for a single man to live on.

- † At first he enjoyed his ample salary and spent money on cards, tobacco, and brandy. And then something happened that changed everything.
- † "He had just finished paying for some pictures for his room when one of the chambermaids came to his door. It was a cold winter day, and he noticed she had nothing to protect her except a thin linen gown. He reached into his pocket to give her some money to buy a coat but found he had too little left. Immediately the thought struck him that the Lord was not pleased with the way he spent his money. He asked himself, Will thy Master say, 'Well done, good and faithful steward?' Thou hast adorned thy walls with the money which might have screened this poor creature from the cold! O justice, O mercy! Are not these pictures the blood of this poor maid?"
- † Pretty dramatic stuff. But that's what helped Wesley live out his formula. Wesley got in trouble with the 18<sup>th</sup> century British version of the IRS—they couldn't figure out how he earned so much but had so little—they thought he was hiding his wealth.
- † "In the year he earned the equivalent of \$1.4 million, he lived on 2% of his income and gave the remainder away. His tithe, in other words, was 98% - not quite as good as the poor widow in the gospel - but pretty good! During his lifetime, it is estimated Wesley earned the equivalent of \$30 million. When he died, he owned two silver spoons and a few coins. Everything else had been given away."
- † Wesley practiced what he preached as he lived his compassionate and generous life. A great man to be sure, Wesley lived in different financial

times that we do. He didn't have a family and a lot of the constraints that we do. But his formula has merit. The whole of it goes like this:

† **“Do all the good you can,  
By all the means you can,  
In all the ways you can,  
In all the places you can,  
At all the times you can,  
To all the people you can,  
As long as ever you can.”**

† At our church in Helena, we used to sing this as our doxology. It's a good reminder, even though we don't always live by it. But we can try.

† Remember the widow in Ferrol Sams's short story? She had that Baptist preacher convinced that the church was only going to receive a tenth of what he thought was owed the church.

† The young woman, though, handed over a check for \$12,500—her full tithe—because she believed that was the right thing to do. Yes, she designated it to be used as a scholarship fund to help poor children go to college, but she gave the whole tithe to be used for God's good and holy purposes through the ministry of her church.

† Now it is our turn to consecrate, to make holy, what we aim to give to God's work through our church. Can we commit to earning all we can, saving all we can, and giving all we can? When we do, we get to be part of God's great passion, great love, for the world. And that makes us wealthy indeed.

† Let us pray: God who binds us together in love,  
In this time of offering --  
this time of letting go of a little bit of our selves --  
help us also to surrender our reluctance and our fears.

Please allow this simple act to draw us closer to one another,  
to the most vulnerable in our community,  
and to You.

In Jesus' name we pray, Amen

† People come forward with estimate of giving cards.

† Sing “Take My Life and Let it Be”

† Receive candy coins—

Sources:

Rev. Marianne Niesen, <http://stpaulshelena.org>

Rev. Jim Kitchens, “Praising God with All our Mites,”

<http://www.secondpresbyterian.net>

