

November 8, 2009

Twenty-third Sunday After Pentecost

“Reacting with Giving”

1 Kings 17:8-16, Hebrews 9:24-28, Mark 12:38-44

The very last piece of pizza can be a quandary. If you are like me, perpetually hungry, you know what I'm talking about. You're with a group of people having pizza and it gets down to the last piece. On the inside you want the piece, but you don't want to be rude and just take it. So you ask, "Does anybody want the last piece?" There is usually at least one other person that wants it but he doesn't want to be rude either so we start the little ritual. He pauses, letting me know there is interest, but then says, "If you want it, go ahead and take it." Not wanting to be a pig I say something like, "If you're still hungry go ahead and take it." This is the critical moment. The unwritten 'two denials rule' means that if he says, "No, you go ahead and take it," that I can respond with the obligatory "You sure?" and he'll say "Yes" and the slice is mine. But if he preempts me with the obligatory "You sure?", I've lost the slice forever.

It's all very polite, but we've already eaten some pizza and we're not desperate. I wonder how the exchange might go if we were famished and that last slice of pizza were the last food we might see for days. The value of that slice of pizza is now great and the idea of giving it up for someone else is a much bigger deal than when it was just one slice of many. This kind of sacrifice is the kind we find troubling. It's the kind that hurts. It's the kind we may choose not to make.

Yet in our Bible readings today this seems to be exactly the kind of sacrifice God is looking for from His people.

In our Old Testament reading we have this audacious request by God's prophet Elijah. This poor widow is gathering sticks to prepare the last of her food so that she and her son may eat it and then face starvation. What is Elijah's request? "Feed me first." What nerve that guy has! But we have to remember the Elijah is following God's direction when he finds this widow and asks her this great favor. So if we're going to be shocked at the nerve to make such a request, we're really saying, "What nerve God has!"

But we have to keep in mind that this favor is asked in light of a promise from God. "*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.'*"

That's a pretty incredible promise, but apparently the woman believes God's prophet Elijah because there is no hint that she gives any hesitation or argument. Scripture simply says, "*And she went and did as Elijah said.*" She trusts the Word of the Lord and does as she is asked, and of course the Word of the Lord comes to pass and she and her household are abundantly provided for.

In the more familiar story in our Gospel lesson we have a widow who does something even more incredible. It doesn't look like much. She simply drops two of the smallest of coins in the offering box at the temple in Jerusalem. But Jesus is watching her and explains what has taken place, "*She out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.*"

We know absolutely nothing more about this woman than that she is a widow, she is extremely poor, and that she gives the little she does have to the Lord's house. We can only speculate as to her motives, but I have to think that behind these actions is trust and faith in Yahweh. She is facing great hardship and possibly death by starvation, yet her actions are not

those of someone clinging desperately to the things of this world, but trusting in the God who has promised peace and comfort in the next.

Both of these widows sacrificed, really sacrificed. They did not give just a portion of what they had, they gave all that they had. They were willing to go without in order to give to God. In such giving they were acting out their faith in the provision and promise of God.

Do we give this same way? I don't mean do we give down to our last penny. Although we have such examples here and elsewhere in Holy Scripture, God never makes that demand on all Christians. What He does make clear is that we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. In our sin we don't do this perfectly, but if we are doing it to any degree it's going to show in our words, actions and yes, in our checkbooks.

But we shouldn't be motivated by this as a very law-oriented reason for giving; doing it because God says so. We should be doing it because of the reason we love God with our hearts, souls, minds and strength. We should be doing it for the same reason the widows did. We do it in response to the wonderful promises of the Lord our God. We do it because of our trust in what God has done for us through His Son Jesus Christ.

*"He has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself."*

What we confess and believe is that the almighty and all powerful creator of all that is, including each one of us, submitted Himself to not only become one with the humanity that had rejected Him but to suffer their punishment in their place and at their very hands. Almighty God out of His immense and immeasurable love gave up Himself for us who don't deserve and even today can barely comprehend such a sacrifice.

This is the way we should look at our blessed existence as Christians. When we consider our property—our house, our cars, our stuff, whether they be fancy or humble—we should be saying "Holy cow! Jesus became next to nothing and died to save me from hell and on top of that He's blessed me with food, shelter and all this stuff!" When we look at our health, good or bad, we should be awed in the knowledge that God loves us so much that He has given us not only life here on earth, but gave Himself so we can be with Him forever. When we receive our paycheck, no matter how big or how small, we should be thinking, "Wow! Jesus suffered and died for me, and as if that wasn't enough he gives me cash!"

The faithful response to these gifts is a desire to give back; not just what we think we can spare but in the same way we have been given to—sacrificially; in a way that really shows our thanks to and love of the God that has done so much for us.

I think Grace's Fall Festival is a good picture of such giving. A lot of people both within and outside of Grace's membership sacrificed a lot of time, talent and treasure to pull off something that lasts but a day, brings no money into the church coffers, and benefits a bunch of people most of us will never meet. And although there may be a few sin-induced times of frustration and anger along the way, the doing of Fall Fest is carried out with joyful heart and giving spirit by all those involved. And when it is all said and done there is not a whole lot of patting ourselves on the back, but instead we're thankful to God that He has blessed the endeavor and allowed us to return love and praise to Him through the effort. Such giving isn't so much a labor as it is a joy in Christ, and that's how it should be.

If everything we have in this earthly life boils down to that one last piece of pizza sitting in the carton, even if it is our very breath of life itself, we can give it up for God. It can never be a loss. What God has promised us in Jesus is the banquet feast of the Lamb with Chicago deep dish pizza as far as the eye can see.

Gladly sacrifice because God has sacrificed so much out of love for you and gifted you with immeasurable eternal blessing. Give not out of obligation or duty, but in reaction to the saving action of Jesus Christ on the cross. Strive to give your entire self—heart, soul, mind and body—to God each and every day because He lovingly sacrificed His Son to purchase all of you into a perfect eternity.