**24 Pentecost**

**November 8, 2015**

**In the name of the God of all creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

Every year about this time one of the selection included in our lectionary has something to do with money. In one of the years of the three year rotation there is the story of the Pharisees trying to catch Jesus in a gotcha moment. Jesus is presented with a coin with the impression of the emperor on it. He is asked whether people should pay their taxes. Jesus says “Give to Caesar’s what is Caesar’s, and give to God what belongs to God.” Then, in another year, there is the story of the humble tax collector and the proud Pharisee praying at the Temple. In Jesus’ eyes the humble but despised tax collector is the more faithful of the two because he gives his tithe from his heart. And then, of course, there is the story we just heard. It is most often referred to as the story of the widow’s mite … although our contemporary bible translations no longer call it a “mite.”

We hear these stories this time of year because of the wisdom of those powers-that-be who decided on the lectionary. They understood that it was usually in the fall that annual budgets for the coming year were being discuss by vestries and mission boards, and the annual stewardship campaign needed a good story to get things going. So, this morning is a stewardship sermon!

In the Jewish tradition there is a term “tzedakah” which literally means “righteousness” or “justice” but is most often translated as “charity.” Many Jewish homes will have a tzedakah box in which to put money. Sometimes it may be nothing more than depositing spare change like in a piggy bank … but since pork is not kosher you don’t find many Jewish homes with piggy banks. Most often, people contribute to a tzedakah box in thanksgiving for a blessing, or in remembrance a moment of joy, or when they see the suffering of others and have no other way to help them. When full, the contents of the tzedakah box are given to some charity, or to the local synagogue or temple to be distributed to others in need.

And tzedakah boxes come in all sizes. Those of you have been to Temple Bet Yam, will have seen a rather large and nicely decorated tsedakah box in their vestibule area. Now, I imagine that it was just such a tzedakah box that Jesus was observing when he saw the poor widow deposit the two coins in the story we just heard. In the time of Jesus there was a Temple tax for those who used the services of the Temple, but this story isn’t about the Temple tax … it is about voluntary giving … an act of charity in thanksgiving for blessings.

The story is rather straight-forward. Jesus is criticizing those who wear fine robes, and seek the best seats in the Temple and at banquets, and those who take advantage of the estates of widows, while making spectacles of themselves by saying long prayers. And then, of course, there were the wealthy who were making large contributions at the Temple. Yet Jesus praises a poor widow who gives all she has … a true gift of sincere charity. That Jesus chose to tell this story about a disenfranchised woman in a male dominated society is telling in itself, and that she is the one to show true, sincere charity instead of a showy, self-serving donation emphasizes the point. There is more to giving than just the size or the amount of the gift.

And there is a subtle point of the story as well. In a materialistic world, even in the time of Jesus, a gift is most often looked at for its value to the one who receives it. Three plane loads of relief supplies to the Syrian refugees in Europe is better than two plane loads. A gift of $50 million to a hospital is obviously more important than a $100 donation … for one thing the $50 million probably buys naming rights for a new wing. Obviously, the more you give does makes a difference to the one who is receiving the gift.

Yet I think that one of the points Jesus is making is that the real value of the gift is not to the one receiving it, but rather to the person making the gift, and in this case a gift of two copper coins may be much more valuable to the spirit of the poor widow than a gift of 100 drachmas for a wealthy landowner. That is the point of the tzedakah box … it is not the amount in the box that makes the difference. Rather, it is the spirit that both encourages the donation and is rewarded by its blessing.

That is the true meaning of faithful stewardship. We have been given our lives as blessed children of God and we are given the opportunity to give back. Stewardship is how we order our lives, share our talents and resources, respond to our joys and blessings, and live with empathy and compassion towards others in need. And true stewardship has abundant and deep spiritual rewards.

This is my stewardship sermon. However, there is more. There is, of course, the issue of operating the church and paying our bills. Let me be clear, stewardship is not just about making a pledge of financial support to the church … but it certainly can include that. And since it is time for us to look at our budget for next year … both revenues and expenses … I’m going to talk about some hard facts (with apologies to those who may just be visiting or who are relative new to the congregation).

There are many ways for faith communities pay for their budgets. At Temple Bet Yam … as in many Jewish communities … members pay dues, and then they also make contributions to a tzedakah box or other special funds if they want. Some other faith communities rely completely on what shows up in the offering plate every week … there are no pledges to count upon and therefore the budget is always a moving target. Some churches take up special offerings for each particular part of their ministry … sometimes several in one service. They may take up an offering for their Sunday School, and their ministry to a nursing home, and the for a organ … or whatever. And there are still other variations. One Episcopal congregation I knew in Toledo, Ohio solicited people’s pledges of financial support, placed them all in a large basket on Sunday morning, gave thanks to God for their blessings, then took the un-opened envelopes outside and burned them as a sign of their trust that the money would be there to do the ministry they were called to do.

Those are some of the ways that churches and other faith communities fund their expenses. But then there are churches and faith communities like St. Cyprian’s … and like many non-profit organizations … that solicit pledges of financial support each year as they make plans for the coming year. We do not ask for dues, and we do not “nickel and dime” people for every little project we want funded. We choose not to have a seasonal fund raising campaign like WJCT.

So, this is how we do at St. Cyprian’s … we solicit your pledge of financial support once a year to pay for our ministries, to pay our light and water bills, telephone, alarm and internet service, to pay for the paper and ink for our bulletins, and to pay for the administration of the church … for me as your priest, and Holly Horahan as the church’s Office Administrator.

In 2008 … the year I started as Vicar of St. Cyprian’s … our pledge income was only $26,000. In the seven years since then our pledge income has grown steadily to $104,500 for this year … 2015. And the amount of our plate offering … the offerings by people who have not made a formal pledge to the church … has grown to over $16,000 a year.

When St. Cyprian’s was formed in the late 1890’s the Episcopal Diocese of Florida provided clergy every few months to celebrate Holy Communion, and lay leaders would officiate at other services. In 1901 the Rev. P. W. Cassey became the first Vicar of St. Cyprian’s and served until his death in 1917. The Rev. P. W. Cassey’s stipend and housing were paid for by the Diocese. In its 119 year history St. Cyprian’s has been a mission congregation and has received either financial support from the Diocese, or in-kind support from the Diocese of Florida, or from Trinity Parish, by supplying clergy to conduct services. In 1999 the annual budget of St. Cyprian’s was less than $10,000 … because the responsibility of paying for clergy and other administrative cost were borne by others. St. Cyprian’s has been dependent upon others to make ends meet for almost its entire history. That is until five years ago. We now have a balanced budget paid entirely by the contributions of the people of this parish … and we continue to grow in numbers, spirit, ministries, and resources.

St. Cyprian’s is a very special place … there is no other church like this in the area. This congregation is open, accepting, welcoming, inclusive, progressive and a lot of other things. We include persons that are not included elsewhere … whether if it because of their theological views (or lack of them), their sexual orientation, or because they just don’t feel like they fit in in other communities. Yesterday we constructed a Prayer Wall on the Commons at St. Cyprian’s. The Prayer Wall, and the Chapel, and the labyrinth, and the Commons itself all comprise a “place of prayer for all people” … regardless of a person’s church or faith affiliation … and that includes those who may not have any church or faith affiliation. That is just one of the things that makes this congregation of St. Cyprian’s such a special place. And, it is my belief that when people are enthusiastic … literally “filled with spirit” … they respond with their resources and their gifts of time, talent, and treasure and it becomes a spiritually fulfilling practice rather than just an obligation.

In the next week or so most of you will receive a letter and a pledge card. I hope that you will respond prayerfully with what is appropriate for you. This congregation has bold dreams and to fulfill those dreams we need generous resources. But the greatest resource is not the material currency but rather the spirit of your heart and soul. That is what Jesus saw in the poor widow and did not see in the others. The poor widow was rich in love, charity, righteousness, justice, compassion, and in a faith that she was a beloved child of God. When all of us know that kind of spirit in our own hearts and souls then we will all also be rich in God’s currency.

Remember the poor widow. The point Jesus is making is that the real value of the gift is to the person making the gift, and in that case a gift of two copper coins may be much more valuable to the spirit of the poor widow than a gift of 100 drachmas for a wealthy landowner. That is the point of the tzedakah box … it is not the amount in the box that makes the difference. Rather, it is the spirit that both encourages the donation and is rewarded by its blessing. Faithful stewardship is a spiritual practice … it is an act of charity in response to the blessing we know as beloved children of God. I encourage your faithful and prayerful stewardship as a means to know the deep blessing of sincere charity.

Amen.