

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

The Most Famous Widow

Sunday, November 7, 2021

Rev. Dr. Charley Reeb, Senior Pastor

Today I am going to tell you a trade secret. Well, maybe it's more of a confession. Most preachers I know salivate over our text for today. It gives us all the license we need to fleece the sheep:

"You see this woman who gave all she had! Be like her. Give til it hurts!"

"Are you really making a sacrifice when you give? The gift that counts is the gift that costs. So, pony up people, let's pass the plate one more time until your pockets are empty like this widow. Then we will know if your faith is genuine."

As you know, I am not opposed to preaching this message. It sure is a good one. I've preached it before. You can really shuck the corn with it!

But my hunch tells me that this widow would not be a fan of that interpretation. The text does not give us any indication that she knew Jesus or anyone else was watching her put money in the treasury. She had no desire to be recognized. She wasn't trying to give a demonstration of her great faith. She couldn't fathom we would be talking about her 2,000 years later and the meager pittance she gave. To her it was just another day to enter the Temple and worship God. She lived a hard life. Widow's had it rough in those days...She was grateful to have that time of worship. She wasn't out to get recognized, regarded or rewarded.

I don't believe it ever occurred to her that she was making much of a sacrifice. For her, it was the right thing to do. And it is what she wanted to do. It's hard for many of us to believe, but some people are that committed.

Eric Hulstrand of Binford, North Dakota, was preaching one Sunday when an elderly woman named Mary fainted and struck her head on the end of the pew. Immediately, an Emergency Medical Technician in the congregation called an ambulance.

As they strapped Mary to a stretcher and got ready to head out the door, she regained consciousness. She motioned for her daughter to come near. Everyone thought she was summoning her strength to convey what could be her final words.

The daughter leaned over until her ear was at her mother's mouth. "My offering is in my purse," this dear elderly woman whispered as they carried her out.

Can you imagine? That certainly is commitment – the kind of commitment we see in our text today.

Yeah, this level of commitment from this widow goes deep. Sometimes it's hard to believe that people would be that committed.

But the church could do with more committed people like that. Don't you think? Those who aren't seeking attention. Just want to help contribute to the cause of Christ. Willing and available...You can never have enough of those. They are a premium.

I know one of the things we preachers love to commiserate about when we are together is the need for more committed people in the church. "If only we had more committed people in the church, then we could really do something! If only we had more committed people in the church then we would never have to raise money. If only we had more committed people in the church, we wouldn't burn so many people out. You know so and so? Isn't she wonderful? If I only had 50 of her it would be heaven around here."

No one can complain and whine like a bunch of preachers. I admit. I'm guilty. I'm guilty. "I sure wish more people would come back to church after Covid...."

I recognize that what I am saying is your sermon too. I am preaching to the choir. I know I am preaching to many committed people today who share my desperate desire for more commitment from others.

How do you make more people committed? I guess if I knew the answer to that I would be the greatest church growth guru to ever walk the earth and our church would be the greatest church in all of Christendom.

We would give anything for more commitment. More pledges. More giving. More serving. More effort. More, more, more!

But it seems there is bad news if you listen to some folks. If you read all the literature from religious journals and the stuff that every pastor is supposed to read to keep up with trends in the church, you see that all the experts say that Covid has sucked the commitment out of many church goers. They say many folks will not return.

Do you believe that? I am not so sure.

Maybe instead of worrying about it, we need to be more proactive about motivating people to be active and committed.

Heck, we would settle for more folks who were just half committed. In our text, the rich folk who gave out of their abundance...but at least they gave. They showed up. They gave something. We will settle for that.

And why did they show up? Well, the verses preceding our text seem to infer that many of the prominent and distinguished people came because they got the best seats in the synagogue...

Maybe that's the answer. Have folks sit in the best pews in worship based on how much they give or volunteer, or participate in worship. People need to be appreciated, valued and recognized. We all know that.

Do you think that would work? Maybe we need to think bigger. Maybe we need to be more creative.

I know of a big church with a big budget that had a plan to get more committed people in the church – to get them to show up more often. I don't know if they ever carried out their plan but it was a good one. You have to give them credit. They proposed the idea of building a gigantic roller coaster on the property of the church. You could only ride it if you had a ticket. And the only way you could get a ticket is if you showed up for two hours on a Sunday morning or volunteered two hours during the week.

They were going to have a contest naming the roller coaster. Can you imagine? "The Great Redeemer!" "Armageddon!" "The Rapture"

Do you think that would work?

Maybe a better strategy is to use the oldest trick in the book – to guilt people into being more committed. Just lay guilt trips on people from the pulpit. Maybe that would do it.

Someone sent me a YouTube video of a preacher who just called out people from the pulpit. Said their names. Criticized them for their behavior and told them to get their act together. Can you imagine? I heard the pastor didn't last long after that.

I remember hearing a sermon on our text for today. The preacher didn't call me out, but did use the old widow to hammer home the fact that we need to get our priorities straight! He talked about a man who hired a well-known financial consultant to help him plan his life. This consultant he told him, "I hear two things coming out of your mouth." He drew a box. He said, "This box is your life." Then outside of the box he put a dollar sign representing money and a cross representing Christ. He said, "I hear two things vying for attention in your life. I can't help you plan your life until you tell me which of these things you want in the center of that box which represents your life."

Then the preacher said, "Which comes first the dollar sign or the cross? The poor widow didn't have much in the way of material possessions, but she knew where her priorities lay. God was first in her life. Is God first in your life?"

Yeah, that's not bad. But you know what I am learning as a preacher? That those messages are not as effective as I used to think. Because people know that God should be first in their life. People know what their priorities should be. They know all the "shoulds". But knowing what you should do and doing it are two different things.

So, I don't think sermons like that are always the answer. Beating people over the head, making them feel guilty about not putting God first in their life isn't always a good strategy. Because here is the truth. You can't make people more committed. I can preach the candles down and use every homiletical strategy in the book, but if folks don't want to commit, they won't commit. Folks have to have ears to hear. Oh, I could bring the Atlanta Braves in here to talk and get this place packed and lock the doors and deprive everyone of lunch for a few hours until they signed a pledge card or promised to serve in the nursery, but that is not a long-term solution.

People are either committed or they are not. I guess the right question to ask is why are committed people so committed. I mean, have you ever thought about what motivated that poor widow to give all the money she had in her pocket? I don't know but I don't think it was, "Well, I filled out a pledge card and I don't want to receive another letter from the Rabbi."

I mean, does the mother getting up in the middle of the night with her newborn baby think, “When I left that hospital, I made a commitment to that doctor that I would do the right thing. I would make feeding my baby a priority.”

Does the husband look after his wife ill with cancer say, “Well, I did sign that marriage license years ago and it’s still binding.”

Does the group of friends show up for the funeral of their friend say, “She did buy our lunch the last time we were together. We ought to go.”

I don’t think so. I think it does go much deeper than that, don’t you think?

Today is All Saints Sunday. We remember and celebrate all the Saints who were so committed – from the poor widow who gave all she had to people in this church who gave so much.

I recall a Saint like that in one of the Florida churches I served. His name was Sam. He volunteered at the church so much he needed an office. One of the things he did was mow the lawn. The church had a huge lawn and in the summer heat the grass grew like crazy.

Well, Sam got cancer. He was getting Chemo. He was weak from it. One day I looked out my office window and there was Sam mowing the lawn! He came in to get some water and I said, “Sam, what are you doing? Go home and rest!”

“No, I’m okay.”

“Sam, go home. What are you doing this for?”

“Charley, did it ever occur to you that I care! I care about you. And I care about what happens to this church. I care. Is that so hard to accept? You’re not the only one who cares about this church. I do too. It’s that simple. I care.”

“Why do you care so much?”

“Because what the church does matters. It makes a difference. You don’t know this but when we joined this church many years ago, it was my wife who wanted to do it. I was a drunk and a cheat and my life hit rock bottom. The church didn’t judge me. It helped me. It saved me. It saved my marriage. Does that answer your question?”

Oh, it had been a hard week. I was tired, a bit discouraged. Into my office walks this humble young man with one of my sermon manuscripts in his hand (Do people really read those?). It reminded me I was way behind in getting sermon scripts out from previous sermons. I still am.

He handed me the sermon script. It looked well used. Like it had been held and read many times. He said, “That sermon changed my life. I was in prison awaiting to be released by my parole board. I was pretty much guaranteed a release but because of some political reason it never happened. I was sitting in my lonely prison cell devastated and heartbroken. I thought, ‘What’s the point?’ I might as well join a gang and take drugs. The prison was on lockdown because of gang violence and a prison guard opened the door. They never open prison cell doors during a lockdown. It was guard who said that I had some mail. He threw me the envelope. It was this sermon that my grandmother sent me entitled “Keep the Faith.” Well, I read and decided to keep the faith and not give up. So, here I am. And I just wanted you to know that your sermon changed my life.”

Do people really read those manuscripts?

I need those experiences, those lessons. Because I get cynical. I get jaded. It’s one of the most dangerous hazards of my vocation. You begin to think people don’t care and that nothing you do ever makes a difference. And then Saints like these bring me back from the brink by reminding me that folks really do care. What we do matters. It makes a difference.

I am sure you have your own stories and experiences that jolt you back into why we make such a fuss about faith and church.

You see, that’s the truth behind committed people. They don’t have greater faith. They aren’t holier. They aren’t perfect. They care. They really care. Because they believe that what they do for God and the church matters. It makes a difference.

I think that’s what that widow would want us to know. She didn’t have more faith than us. She wasn’t holier than us. She simply had the audacity to believe that what she gave made a difference. She cared. Do we care that much?

Do we care about all of this? Does it really matter that much to us? Do we really believe what we do makes a difference? I have learned what when someone believes that they are more than willing to do all they can, give all they can, and they don't think twice about it. Some people call that commitment.



11180 Medlock Bridge Road Johns Creek, GA 30097
770-497-8215 www.johnscreekumc.org