

The Mark of the Faithful Christian, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 23061112
Ruth 4:13-17 and Mark 12:38-44
Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 12 November, 2006

This morning, we heard two scriptures about the power of widows. As Naomi held her bouncing new grandson, she realized that God had not left her empty, but had filled her with promise. She had the love of a her daughter-in-law Ruth, and the joy of this grandchild. Had it not been for her persistence, and the commitment of Ruth, this joyous day would never have come. We know, looking back on history, that Naomi was the great great grandmother of king David. The nation Israel would not even have come into existence, were it not for the giving and the commitment of the widows Naomi and Ruth.

The third widow is the star of Jesus' report about the importance of giving. You've heard about her before. She put two small copper coins (all she had) into the offering at the temple. You've no doubt heard ministers compare her gift to your financial gifts, and, you've no doubt felt guilty. We preachers can get church members to feeling guilty about their giving to churches. After all, we'd like our members to repent and really commit themselves to the joy of giving to God.

The members of one church thought their white clapboard building was looking a bit shabby, but didn't have the money in the budget to pay for paint. Their preacher suggested they spread the cost around. Every family could donate just one gallon of white paint. The trustees suggested they could account for differences in shades of white from one manufacturer to the next by asking members to pour their gallons of paint into one large bucket and mix it. The only requirement was that the paint be water based, so it would all mix together.

Lyle was having a difficult week financially, but wanted to donate. He thought it wouldn't matter with all that paint if he were to pour in a bucket of water. No one would notice. Melinda was having a difficult time making ends meet. She thought she might add a little water to her paint contribution. In fact, most of the members of that church were having financial problems, and so most of the members contributed watered-down paint.

The next weekend, the church had their painting party. The people got to work early in the morning, because of the threat of rain according to the weather report. They painted energetically, and everyone had a ball. The storm clouds gathered as predicted, while they were nearing completion of the building. George, the head of the building department was finishing the steeple as the first rain drops began falling. The rain came down harder as the painting crew gathered under tent in the yard.

At first, the paint began streaking. Then, as the storm's fury rose to its height, the paint all washed off. The members of the church were horrified to see the results of their efforts dripping onto the ground. The shabbiness of their building reappeared. The lightning flashed, and out of the thunder came the deep booming voice: "Repaint, repaint, and thin no more."

The story of the widow's gift is the story of human faith and God's justice. Jesus had just warned his followers about religious leaders who devoured widows' houses, and here was one of those widows!

The scribes, who displayed a pious front to the public, gladly took anything they could, including property, from even the poorest of the poor. This widow, out of faith, put all of her savings into the temple treasury.

If we were there that day, perhaps we would be on the side of justice. We would watch those

religious leaders, and hold them accountable for that widow's welfare, wouldn't we? She gave all she had in anticipation and trust that the synagogue would take care of her.

Pat Tucker Spier is the former President of our division of Global Ministries. She went to Mozambique a few years ago. While she was there, a woman came up to her clutching a bill, some Mozambiquan currency. She gave it to Pat. She asked Pat to put it to use to spread the Gospel.

Pat held onto that bill, looking for an opportunity to use it. Could she buy a book with it? Could she buy a shirt for a child in a program for homeless youth? She carried it to meetings and told her story of the poor woman in Mozambique who had given her her treasure. Even poor people give for God's work.

One day, Pat went to a bank here and was told that the bill was worthless in terms of U. S. dollars. But was the gift worthless? No, not God's terms. The money may seem worthless in U. S. dollars. You can't purchase stock with it. You can't build a building with it. You can't purchase even a book or a shirt. But that bill is priceless in God's terms. Here is the faithfulness of giving. Here is the joy of giving. That "worthless" bill is spreading the Good news of God's love. The Christian faith has reached around the world, and there in Mozambique is a Christian woman who gives what she has to spread love and compassion.

It isn't the amount of the gift that counts with God, it is the spirit with which it is given. This bill wasn't given grudgingly or out of guilt. It was given in joy and gratitude.

There are other stories of joyful giving. Students and faculty at the University have given money and school supplies to replace the books and teaching supplies at the burned out school in the next county. Our members have collected toiletries and toys for abuse victims at the Family Abuse Services shelter.

In God's economy, money isn't exchanged at face value. It is exchanged according to the spirit of giving.

Whether the gift is persistence like Ruth's, moral support like Naomi's, financial giving like the Mozambiquan woman or Jesus' widow in the temple, Christians are at their best when they're giving, the same way God gives: unconditionally and completely.