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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2B32, J26
23 Pentecost (Proper 26B) 8:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. Eucharist
Sunday 31 October 2021 Stewardship Ingathering

Ruth 1:1-18
Psalm 146
Hebrews 9:11-14
Mark 12:28-34

Why Are Churches Always Asking for Money?

“You are not far from the kingdom of God” (Mk. 12).

One of my favorite congregants, is a surly lifelong westerner. Despite his PhD in Chemistry he speaks plainly and does not beat around the bush. He once said, “Why is the church always asking for money.” I love my friend, but he is a challenging friend.¹

1. I have two simple answers to this question and between them I am going to talk about the book of Ruth. First, churches ask for our money because *we* need to give. This may sound self-serving coming from me, but the purpose of this Cathedral is not to coddle you like a child. It is to help you be as complete and fully human as you can be. This only happens when we give. Giving makes us human. Giving is how we experience our self as we were made to be, in the image of God.

This is not just true for adults. Children learn who they are by giving. I remember when our son Micah was four years old he would say surprising things. One night I was doing the dishes and he said, "Daddy, I never want you to get old." This led to a long talk about how God makes us ready for things that we are not ready for right now. Yes, I do believe that spiritually mature people are ready for anything, even their own death.

Later that night, he told me that when I do get old, he will take care of me. Micah still did not really understand what death is. He sensed anxiety around the idea of human mortality, but his response was to think about how he could give. In those days our two-year-old girl Melia had just barely learned to talk. More often than anything else she would say, "Let me help you Bubba." As parents it is part of our job to offer opportunities to help, even when it is much easier for us to just do it ourselves. We learn to give, before learning that we will one day die.

If you want to get something out of spiritual life try giving more to it. In piano lessons, at football practice, in Latin class, at work, in graduate school and your hobbies we learned that the more we put into an activity, the more we get out of it. This is true for church also. We have to work for God, in order for this to really work for us, for God to work *on* us.

One of the things that has pleased me most in recent years is the new life I see around people associated with the Cathedral's Stewardship Committee. They have a difficult task and it has really brought out the best in them. They share a common spirit. They know that the Cathedral helps to keep their cup filled spiritually, so that they can do ministry out in the world.

Next week we will make promises as part of the baptism service. Our spiritual lives will not be complete if we cannot find a way to serve God's church. I wouldn't ask us to do this if I was not sure that this service can enrich and transform our lives, in a way that we may not even be able to imagine right now.

2. The Old Testament book of Ruth interrupts the account of tribes, nations and empires with a story about one single family and its struggles.² Naomi, her husband and two sons are environmental refugees. Famine forces them to flee their home and move to the country of their enemies. After they arrive the husband dies and the two sons marry women of that country named Orpah and Ruth.

After the sons die their mother Naomi announces to these daughters-in-law that she is going to return to her own country. The three clearly love each other and weep. Orpah decides to stay and Ruth chooses to go with Naomi to the country of her enemies where they speak a strange language and follow different traditions. She says, "Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God" (Ruth 1).

In Israel the two women are starving. But there is a tradition that might help them, that of the family redeemer. After a man's death a nearby relative will marry his widow, caring for the family and the land. The problem is that Ruth is a foreigner and the books of Ezra and Nehemiah prohibit marrying outside of Israel. So in Ruth's case the nearest relative refuses to marry her. But Boaz generously marries Ruth. They have a son and the two women are saved from disaster.

But that is not all. The story ends in a genealogy which shows that this son is the grandfather of David, the greatest king of Israel and ultimately a lineal descendent of Jesus, the savior of the world.

But there is still more to this. So many people say that the story is about loyalty. But really Naomi didn't have a claim on Ruth. Nor was Boaz required to marry a foreigner. These were acts of great generosity. In fact the book follows a very tight structure. The first chapter is about terrible death and loss, and Ruth's generosity in the face of disaster. The last chapter is about the new life that comes from Boaz's generosity.

It is important to notice also that at first the book seems to have nothing to do with God. The narrator never mentions God. In the first chapter Naomi cries out that, "the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me" (Ruth 1). And yet God acts behind the scenes. Through ordinary, plain people, through an immigrant and the one who helped her, but above all through human generosity, God puts in motion a plan to save the world.

3. I have another challenging friend who talks about money all the time. That friend is Jesus. Jesus encourages generosity. I said that there were two reasons to give money to the Cathedral. The first reason is that you need it. The second is that the Cathedral needs it too. The Cathedral wouldn't need our money at all if together we had a different idea of what church should be.

Let me explain. In the 1980's Robert Bellah and some of his colleagues at UC Berkeley wrote a book called *Habits of the Heart*. In this sociological account of American society the authors evaluate our collective piety. One of the most memorable interviews is with a woman named Sheila.

Sheila is a young nurse who actually named her faith after herself. There is not much to it. She says, "I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice." She says, "It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself..."³

The church of Sheilaism does not require generosity or money or even other people. But it is hard to see how this kind of religion can make us better, more complete or healed. It has no real content, no moral guidance, no weight of tradition, no healing but above all no community. There is no one else to challenge you if self-centeredness, or ignorance blinds you to the truth.

Ralph Waldo Emerson exclaims, God, "does not act upon us from without... but spiritually through ourselves... the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old."⁴ I look around at you and I see God putting forth his life through this Cathedral, through the generosity that makes everything we do possible.

In our society, in Northern California especially, there is constant pressure to be competitive, to go it alone, to resist the very kind of community that human beings were meant for. But through Grace Cathedral, together in-person and online, we become Jesus' living body in the world. We believe what the Bible teaches us, that faith is involved in every aspect of life.

This does not mean our faith is perfect, only that we are trying very hard to let God transform the world through our lives together. Through our generosity, through volunteering, and working together God is shaping the modern world, just as God silently worked in the book of Ruth.

My sermon today has a postscript. Earlier I mentioned that we learn generosity before we learn about death. Rowan Williams writes about how sometimes in interviews famous people are asked how they want to be remembered at the end. "[A]s if the goal of life were to arrive at a condition of maturity and control, of wise and powerful action."⁵

In contrast to this picture, Williams talks about the way Jesus' mother Mary could simply receive the Holy Spirit without spectacular effort. Williams writes, "What if this is really the purpose of our lives? What if the point of all we achieve, all we succeed in" and I would add all that we give, "is to teach us to *receive* more deeply and more peacefully?"

"As if what we need to produce by the time of our death is just – child-like simplicity? Being able at last just to be welcomed, to be embraced by the Real that we've so long neglected and even run away from? Whatever life is like on the far side of death, it's a reasonable guess that it is not like anything we could have imagined. It *could not be* another episode in the great drama of Myself, my busy, worried, ambitious, talkative, fearful self."

We give for the sake of ourselves so that we can become more mature, so that God can work through our generosity in the way of Ruth and Boaz. We give for the sake of this

Cathedral so that authentic spiritual community can be possible here. Finally we give in the hope that we can learn to receive what we long for from God.

Let us pray: Most generous God in a world of scarcity and abundance, we thank you for what we have, especially for each other. You make us one body in Christ with the opportunity to serve you in new and unexpected ways always rejoicing in the strength and love of your son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Pictures:

Micah

Melia

Stewardship Committee

Grace Cathedral

Robert Bellah? Or the cover of *Habits of the Heart*?

Rowan Williams?

¹ For decades Bob never went to church with his wife Mary, but after her death he never missed a Sunday.

² The Septuagint placed Ruth between Judges and 1 Samuel. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible Revised Standard Version* chapter introduction.

³ Robert Bellah, et. al. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley Press, 1985) 221.

⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," (the book, not the essay) in *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. Stephen Whicher. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957) 50.

⁵ Rowan Williams, *Candles in the Dark: Faith, Hope and Love in a Time of Pandemic* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2020) 71-2.