

We all love stories, as it seems it is easier to relate to a story than to remember a lecture. And so often, in scripture, it is the stories that are told which make it easier for us to remember the lessons God wishes to share.

For instance, one day Jesus warned against those who were wealthy and powerful and made of show of how much they gave to others, solely for the purpose of being rewarded and talked about. That is no different than movie stars or athletes who go out of their way to be seen on TV or the cover of the latest magazine. Jesus cautioned against doing “good” only so that others would be impressed.

And then he saw a widow who put a meager gift into the temple offering and shared that story, to illustrate the message he wanted his audience to remember. Some of the rich and powerful made certain everyone knew of their wealth, but it was a poor widow (a woman with no support system or wealth) whose meager gift became an object lesson for all. Her gift was not different than a person of fragile health sharing a kidney for a transplant or a young mother wearing herself out feeding hungry people in a shelter.

In 1<sup>st</sup> Kings 17, there was another surprising sacrifice, as another widow shared her last meal with a guest she did not expect. And let me remind you that in those days, a widow was someone with little or no support at all, whose only hope was usually a handout from someone else.

God sent Elijah to her home with a surprising request. . She explained this was her last bit of food, as they were in a time of famine and she and her son were facing imminent death of starvation. Elijah asked her let him share in her last supper, promising all would be OK. Out of love, she did, and like manna from heaven, the food continued to reappear each day. It never ran out.

Think about these two widows, one in the temple and one in her home. Each shared the last of their “wealth” (which wasn’t much at all), giving it away for the sake of someone else. Such sacrificial surrender gets everyone’s attention because it is so rare and seems such a lavish gift. A last supper for a surprise guest and surrendering one’s only money to help someone poorer than that widow.

Both widows had already given up husbands, security, protection, and how they literally gave up their lives in surrender to strangers. That is nothing but the “poorest investment strategy” that the world has ever known. Can you imagine giving everything away with no hope of return or restoration? Such gift giving didn’t make sense. It defied logic, and it is not something we see often in our world today!

Our abundance causes us caution with this story from Matthew. Because we have so much, we begin by feeling guilty. But the point of Jesus’ story is not to make you feel

guilty but to help you examine what the priorities of your life might be. Following Jesus is not just about being “saved” ... which is the emotional reward that so many seek and wish to throw in everyone else’s face. Following Jesus is about “following in Jesus’ footsteps, which means washing feet, embracing the lonely, seeking the lost, and being willing to surrender for the sake of someone else.

Sometimes we forget the cost of discipleship is a call to serve. We reach up to God in prayer and thanksgiving so that our hands are already moving into the openness of serving. We are conditioned by the world and its wisdom to always be certain of a response before we act.

We are taught to gain assurances that investments will grow, that others will appreciate our gifts and that we’ll get credit for time served or donations given. And even though such gestures of outreach are “good,” they might not be what we call sacrifice. And surrender is never complete if something is held in reserve.

Now if everyone gave everything away, that could be done only once, so I think Jesus is making the point, not to condemn wealth and possessions, but to consider how they might indeed become of service in daily witness and ministry for his sake.

I’ll never forget my Grandma sharing how during the Depression, she would always set an extra plate out for lunch because she knew that Grandpa would always stop in the train yards on his walk home and invite a hobo to join them for lunch. My grandparents were dirt poor, but whatever they had they tried to share. I am sure you all have similar stories of people you have known who had little but shared much, and probably no one else but you even knew.

The real question today is not whether or not each of us is a believer. The real question is how will we show that we understand what it means to follow Jesus? And we begin by following Jesus, and trying to walk in his footsteps. Of course he was perfect and did completely what we can only do in part, but that is not to keep us from making the effort.

Jesus surrendered the glory of heaven to accept earthly parents. He gave up what could have been a lucrative public speaking tour and instead welcomed sinners, touched lepers, and moved from village to village to help people learn about God’s gift of love. He surrendered the expected throne and crown of Messiah and instead wore a crown of thorns as he was nailed, willingly, to a tree. And then he surrendered the power of life that is God’s greatest gift and entered a tomb of earthly death.

The easiest way to say this is that he made himself “poor” so that we might share in the incredible heavenly riches of a God who loves us so much. Which leads us to the most important and only relevant question of any lasting value.

If we indeed are living with the gifts of God’s love, how will we respond? How we will

invest what we have been given and what will motivate how we live? Will we love as we have been loved, will we find ways to surrender as God has surrendered for us. And not, out of guilt, and not out of any need for reward, but out of thankfulness for the undeserved grace that is part of every moment of our lives.

There is another reason for this selfless investment strategy -- this idea of surrendering rather than hoarding ... in serving others rather than living only for me.

For only in emptying oneself is there capacity to be filled up. Only in surrender are we able to be renewed. Jesus was only able to accomplish his miracle at Calvary and the empty tomb because he first emptied himself of heavenly glory and came to this earth as a helpless infant.

And just as he was filled with the Spirit and love of God, we too, as we surrender ourselves are able to be filled with lasting and truly valuable gifts. This is a different investment strategy as its motivation has nothing to do with what I get in return, but rather how will someone else be touched by the gifts of love so freely given to me.

Was there ever an investment more ridiculed by the powers that be than the cross? As people changed by that loving investment; how will we respond? -- tws