

Ruth 3: 1-5; 4: 13-17
Mark 12: 38-44
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
November 8, 2015

It's stewardship time. Many of you have received letters in the mail asking you to consider increasing your financial support of the ministry of Jesus Christ at Hamilton Union. So now you come here and hear a story of rich people supporting the ministry of the Temple in Jerusalem and one poor widow.

Yet I must say that if it was not this passage it could have been one of many others. While Jesus was silent about many of the issues that are part of public debate, he had a lot to say about money. Jesus says the desire to acquire and keep or increase our storehouse of money as the number one barrier between human beings and the experience of the peace of God. It is the most obvious symptom of that original sin of Adam and Eve. They wanted to be like God and have control over their lives and that of their world. They exchanged the peace of being in right relationship with God and having everything they needed for the responsibility for surviving this life under their own power. Let's forget about all the language about being morally corrupt and total depravity. Isn't it enough to realize that living in this culture at this time we all worry about money? Will we have enough to send our children to college? Do we have enough insurance? Do we have enough money for retirement? What will happen if we or a family member has a major injury or terrible illness?

Before they gave in to the temptation to be "like God" Adam and Eve didn't have these problems. They had an uncomplicated trusting relationship with God and they had everything they needed. One bite of a seductive bit of fruit and they were busting their backs trying to

cultivate the earth just to survive. Whether there was actually a garden with these two people in it who actually experienced this terrible transformation, who can argue that this is our reality?

Jesus looked upon the people of his day and saw firsthand the suffering caused by the cruel tyranny of the pursuit money and the security it promises. It becomes for Jesus a focal point for his ministry. That is why the spiritual danger of wealth, or more accurately the desire for wealth and the desperate belief that more money will satisfy our deepest needs is so important to Jesus. He does not judge us for this striving and worry. He has compassion for us. He yearns for us to experience the peace that he has with God, a peace he knows the world cannot give. He also knows that we must choose. Jesus recognizes that what we really want is to give enough so that we can feel good but not so much as will threaten our security. "You can't have it both ways," he said. "You cannot serve both God and money."

This is the background when Jesus brings his disciples to the Temple. He tells the disciples to wander about and notice what they see. And so it happens that amid the wealthy people in their flowing robes bringing their generous offering to the treasury, he says to the disciples, "Quickly! Come here! Look!" They hurry to his side and are disappointed to see a woman in a worn black robe slowly making her way to the place where the money goes. They see her empty her pockets of two copper coins and drop them in. Did she hesitate as she took the coins out? We don't know. I like to think that she did. I like to think that she knew that these coins, little as they were, would make her future insecure.

Why is Jesus praising this widow? Shouldn't she keep the money for herself and avoid becoming dependent on others? Shouldn't she be saving her money for a future time? What

kind of a religion asks destitute widows to give everything that they have to an institution that has more money than it knows what to do with? If I had been one of the disciples, I would have wondered about that! The next thing that would hit me in the gut would be this, “Does Jesus expect me to do this? All of a sudden I am patting my pockets, thinking about my elderly parents, my mortgage and car payments and my children’s college debt. OMG!!!

This morning I am tempted to smooth the rough edges of this story to make it more palatable. There must be some way to explain what Jesus means that will make this teaching more...*reasonable!* But the vague queasiness in my stomach as I apply this episode to myself tells me that there is no such explanation.

What, *for God’s sake*, are we meant to do! This last part of the message I will call, “Ruth to the rescue!” Ruth was a widow. Her secure story ended when her husband died. All of a sudden she was exposed and vulnerable. Her mother-in-law decides to move back to Bethlehem where *her* family is. She tells Ruth and Orpah, her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab and seek new husbands. Orpah takes this advice. But Ruth clings to Naomi and insists on joining Naomi on this journey. This is a critical point! Ruth had a story that was perfectly scripted—or so she thought. Then tragedy happened. She had a choice, try to make the old story work in Moab and pretend that finding a husband would keep continuity in her life? Or could she let go of the story and follow Naomi to an unforeseen and unpredictable future.

Ruth chooses to let go of her scripted story and allow a new one to develop. In following Naomi and trusting Naomi’s God to lead her, Ruth finds her place in a much bigger and more wonderful story than she could ever imagine. She is part *God’s* story.

Ruth comes to our rescue because she shows us that it is God's desire that we continually release our need to control our stories and the outcomes of our stories to his care and guidance. God has a much bigger story that is as big as eternity. When we seek to limit our lives to the safety and security of our individual stories we experience anxiety. Will I have enough? How do I protect myself from uncertainty? Why is it that no matter what I have it never seems enough?

What a difference when we recognize that there is a much bigger story! It is a story of God's abiding love and the freedom that comes from trusting in God's daily provision for us! This is the great secret that Jesus teaches: we receive when we let go. It is the secret he attributes to the poor woman who can give what she has because she lives in the generous story of God.

We miss the meaning of the episode of the poor widow if we begin by feeling that we have to give away our money. In the end money has very little to do with what Jesus is teaching. Instead what Jesus is identifying is the way to true spiritual freedom. It is the freedom that comes when we let go of the narratives of our individual stories and allow our story to become one of the great epic of God's story of which we are a small but critically important part.

This message is not about giving more money. It is about letting go of the control of your story into God's story—the greatest story ever told which is still being told—by you and me. Having done that, let's see what happens! Amen.

