

1 Kings 17: 8-16
Mark 12: 41-44
November 11, 2012
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

I have a friend who says that there are two kinds of people: those who think that there are two kinds of people and those who do not. Having said this, I am tempted to say that there are two kinds of people: closed handed people and open handed people. By this I mean that there are people who hold on to what they have out of a deep fear of what will happen if they lose it. *And then* there are the people who are “open handed.” These are the people of whom we say, “He would give you the shirt off his back.” The implication here is that they are not afraid to give away what they have because they trust that they will always have enough.

Now if there are indeed two kinds of people who fall into these categories I am front and center in the closed handed camp. I am fine as long as the money keeps coming in and I can pay my bills, put away funds for retirement and generally feel secure. But let’s say Hamilton Union was located on the coast of New Jersey or Long Island and the building has been destroyed. Suppose, as happened on the Gulf Coast that all of your homes were destroyed and you had to move away to find shelter. Not only would the building be gone but also the congregation. I would have no job. Like you I might have no place to live. What would become of my vaunted generosity? My point is clear: Affluence allows the appearance of generosity, of open handedness. But when our security feels truly threatened we tend to become anxious and self protective.

What complicates this picture is that we live in a profoundly and chronically anxious culture. How many of you have funds invested in the stock market? The day after the election the stock market dropped 300 points. Instantly there was speculation about the effect

of the election. Now we are faced with the projected “fiscal cliff” of the unresolved national budget crisis. We watch in expectation that our national leaders will posture to score political points rather than come together to forge a long term solution. If you are wired like me, just listing these circumstances raises my anxiety level. And we could all list many more examples of life circumstances that appear to threaten our well being. No wonder we want to hold on to what we have! And what a trial to have to come to church on Sunday to hear how we should just trust God and give all that we have. Consider the lilies of the field and the birds of the air! Will not God take care of you? Yeah, right!

How many polls have reported that a leading reason people do not go to church is that we are always talking about money. If I am profoundly anxious about my security why would I go to a place where all they want is my money?

If we are honest, at least as regards open handed and closed handed people, the “two kinds of people” idea is an illusion. We all experience anxiety which leads us to be fearful to give away what we have. Yet, amazingly, in spite our anxiety we are remarkably open handed—not only with our money but with our time. Rather than say that there are two kinds of people, I propose that in fact we are all the same. We are on a journey of faith guided by God’s generous grace from being closed handed to open handed. It is a journey that will be utterly incomplete when we die, but which, as we grow will yield us increasing peace and joy in life.

To illustrate this journey from closed handed to open handed, from acutely anxious to contentment, let me introduce two women. In 1 Kings we meet the widow of Zarepath. There is a famine in the land that has been ongoing and shows no sign of letting up. The prophet Elijah is sent to the home of a widow who has a son. She is about to prepare the last of her

food for one last meal. She expects that after this she and her son will starve to death. She is no longer so much anxious as resigned. When the prophet comes and asks her to prepare a meal for him she is too tired to argue. She looks at him and, I imagine, thinks, “Are you crazy? Of all the places you could visit you impose on me and my son when we are about to eat our last food and die? Are you really that insensitive? Had she been stronger and less beaten down she would probably sent Elijah away with a flea in his ear. As it is, what does it matter? In the end she and the boy will die.

For his part, I guess that Elijah is thinking the same thing. Who am I to ask this woman for a portion of her last bread? Did God really send him here? Somehow Elijah finds the words, “Thus says the Lord, ‘The jar of meal and the jug of oil will not fail until the day God sends rain upon the earth.’” Whether through resignation or great faith the woman does what the prophet says and finds the meal and oil do not give out.

Now we fast forward in time to Jesus’ day. He is in the temple with his disciples. They are apparently impressed with the great sums the wealthy are putting in the treasury. Yet Jesus points out a woman, a widow, who he knows to live day by day. She walks up to the place where the money goes and deposits her money and walks away. Interestingly enough, Mark does not remark on the least bit of anxiety shown by the woman. There is no hesitation. She goes and makes her offering and goes home. May we be permitted to notice a slight zip in her step? Might we notice a sense of well being emanating from her as she makes her way?

I say this because we are so used to having the percentage magnitude of her offering impressed upon us. We are so expecting the preacher to ask us to compare her complete gift with our percentage-wise puny giving that we cannot imagine the woman actually being

joyful and content! We rail against an institution that would demand a poor widow to give up her last penny to the glory of God. And yet, what if this widow is not oppressed? What if it is her greatest joy to give because through her giving she has the spiritual experience of being totally cared for by God?

You see I look at this widow and I see her putting in her tow coins like you and I would use an ATM card. She puts in her offering and draws out, not worldly blessing but the most precious treasure of all—the utter peace and contentment of being completely cared for. So Jesus might well say, “She has given more.” But he might well have observed, “She has also *received* far more than those who kept plenty of funds in reserve against hard times.

Friends this morning I repeat that we are all on a journey of discovery. This journey is one of moving away from the state of being closed handed out of anxiety for our security to see giving as a way of experiencing the profound depth of God’s care for us. We are on a journey of discovering that even when we fear we are in danger of losing everything we are safe in the care of God who will always take care of us.

How do we move forward on the journey? You may be surprised that I am not suggesting you give more money or time. I am suggestion that you think in terms of what I call “little renunciations.”

A little renunciation is a small act letting go of something. Some examples: if you are in a hurry, let somebody into traffic ahead of you. In a discussion where you need to be right acknowledge the validity of someone else’s point. Admit to someone when you have made a mistake or said something hurtful. Here’s a big one: ask your wife or husband or partner, “What would *you* like to do tonight?” Little renunciations. Small ways that we release the grip we have on our own lives and gradually discover that when we do, things often go

better. What begins as a small seemingly unimportant act will gradually gain momentum and we will find ourselves trusting God and seeking the good of others as a way of life. More than that, it will become our greatest joy and pleasure. Amen.