

Sermon Text for June 3, 2018

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

II Kings 4:1-7, Romans 15:22-29

“Sharing your resources”

So how are you all feeling? Families who have kids graduating, I need to tell you, I understand the tired that this tired brings to you. We have just finished up our second graduation in less than a week, the empty nest is looming in front of us, Stacy and I are both about to receive our AARP cards this year, we will have been married 25 years this summer, man, I am tired. Anyway else hear me? You know, I've lived through a lot in my life. I personally have driven through a raging wildfire in Portugal, I have been inside a riot with over 1,000 people fighting, been hosed down by policemen at a soccer game, as an infant been through a 6.7 earthquake, but I have never felt the way that I feel now. I am not afraid, I'm just tired and apathy is not far behind exhaustion.

Paul was writing to the Romans immediately after Claudius, the Roman emperor had kicked all the Jews and Christians out of Rome. There was a mass evacuation of one of the largest cities in the known world by Christians and Jews alike. Some had stayed behind risking their lives and living in a constant state of anxiety and threat. They knew their state of being was going to last. They were tired, they were tired of not knowing from one day to the next if their lives or the lives of their children might be demanded. We don't live in a reality that is like that, many people do in our world, and so Paul in his farewell address to them has to cover a whole range of topics. How do you address a tired people?

But Paul speaks to them and addresses their richness in Christ Jesus. He turns the discussion from what their apparent needs are to their real blessings. Two weeks ago the two people hit the worst were able to say God is good. The next step that we take today is: if you can't help yourself, prove it. Show me how you share your resources in times of need and I will see your love of God.

READ SCRIPTURE

When we talk about the providence of God, we talk about how God is in control. But if you break the word providence down, you get provide. An assurance and promise that we get is that God will provide. I have preached on the material providence of God in our own family's life. I have preached against the prosperity Gospel, but I know I have been a witness that God

provides and I am confident that I will continue to see God's provisions daily. But I also see every day people who have nothing. I think of these places and I wonder if they read the same Bible, if they experience God in the same way I do. I know God provides because I have experienced it, and I have seen people who have nothing experience it as well.

But God's provision is also wrapped up in our stewardship. If we choose to use our money for that which we do not need or is frivolous, I then have a hard time saying God provides, when we waste. If we wanted to live a more simple lifestyle, we could.

God's provision is much more obvious in a simple lifestyle than the one we are currently living because it almost forces you to rely upon your neighbor. Our first Scripture we find a widowed pastor's wife having to rely upon God and her neighbors for her survival. Back then if you went into debt they didn't repo your car, or foreclosed on your house, or take away your furniture or sound system, they took your kids. I think that would cause a lot of people to think twice before they use that credit card.

Well, this poor widow didn't know what to do. Elisha tells her, trust God. I'm going to tell you to do something crazy. Borrow, beg, and get all of your neighbor's oil jugs. Fill them up with oil, from what you have at home, and then sell it. She did, she took that risk of pouring first and trusting, and asking later. Follow my instructions and know that God will provide. Get down to nothing, as a good steward, and God will honor you.

Paul, likewise, speaks to the Romans in a similar vein. You are struggling, but even so, share your resources. There is a fine line between a prosperity Gospel and the theology of providence. I am not saying God will make you rich, the more you give the richer you get. No that is dangerous and that is wrong. No, but I am saying that the more you provide for others, the more you can be assured that God will meet your needs.

Paul at the beginning of these verses says I haven't been able to come to you up to now because remember what I told you before, I promised God that I was only going to preach to the lost. But now that I have done that, I can at least come and visit. When I do come to visit, you who are under a lot of pressure and stretched thin, I expect after I have enjoyed your company, to be sent on by you.

In the Greek this means literally that you will help me on my way. The implication in the Greek is that you will send me off with a little help from my friends, basically, with an offering. He is asking this ravaged community for help in ministry, to look outside of themselves.

He goes on and states that he first has to take to Jerusalem an offering from Greece, almost as an incentive. Greece was filled with gentile Christians, Rome was primarily Jewish

Christians to whom he was writing. So you can't let the gentiles show you up and take up an offering and you do nothing for the cause. I am sure you will be generous.

There is absolutely no doubt in Paul's mind that they would give even as they are stretched thin. It is probably pretty tacky to preach on sharing our resources as we are about to head into the summer when maybe our resources are also stretched thin. We need to look after number one. But Paul says: If you want to enjoy the fullness of the blessing of Christ, you have to look away from yourself and specifically look to Christ.

This pertains to our resources, our time, and our energy. The more we focus on ourselves the less we can experience Christ in our lives. The more we focus on our neighbor and the sharing of resources, the more we can experience the fullness of Christ.

On Friday I gave the seniors of Lancaster Mennonite three principles upon which they could build as they headed out into the world as graduates. I wanted to share those three with you because they all relate to the sharing of our resources. I think I've covered the exegesis of both I Kings and Romans, now this is something that I shared with them. I probably could have saved it for another sermon, but it isn't like it is communion Sunday, Graduation Sunday, or that we have an Italy meeting after church. Let's hear three principles that will set you on your journey.

First, do not fall prey to the culture of more. The Geico commercial which states matter of fact "who doesn't want more?" is a real indication of where our culture stands in encouraging all of us to always seek more, because more is always better. In Luke 12 we read about a man who had too much grain to store so he tore down his buildings and built larger buildings to store the grain. He congratulated himself on a job well done, but then he died. He was about to share, but he died. He was about to be generous, but he died. He was about to put other people first and ahead of himself, but then he died. I hope this church always holds up the hope that there is an alternative to this culture of more which is spelled out pretty clearly in Scripture. When we are greedy we cannot do justice, because in the back of our mind we think if we reach out then someone just might get ours.

Second, Jesus had, and so we should have, a prerogative for the poor. The two are related. Scripture is interesting in what it teaches when we pay attention. We love to preach Jesus, but we don't love to preach what Jesus preached. Today there seems to be a disagreement between Jesus and those who represent him. Keep in mind, all of us in this room, by default, represent him. We as a church, uses the name of Christ to self-define. Lance Thomas once said that confession is good for your soul, but bad for your reputation.

We know that Jesus operated within a system where the church, or in his case the synagogue, refused to take the side of the poor and the powerless. Keep in mind that Jesus was a dangerous brother. He was a dark skinned Palestinian who knew stop and frisk and was on the wrong side of the wall.

Instead, we have made Jesus a preppy prosperity Gospel preacher who demonizes the poor. The politics of Jesus demand that we deal with poverty in the way that Jesus dealt with poverty, and it is a radical message from a radical teacher if we took the time to listen to it.

You see, Jesus the healer never asked if the person had a pre-existing condition. He says using the words of Isaiah that he will release the captives, not put them on parole for we know that teenagers once they are convicted felons can't receive Pell Grants, or financial aid, or many other government sponsored financial help that makes it easier for our students of privilege in this school to go into college. And I stand here as a beneficiary of the system.

Third, and lastly, the powerful and the privileged have a certain responsibility which comes with power and privilege. Simply by the fact that you are attending here you are already in that category of firsts. But once you step out of this sanctuary you take on a certain responsibility that is yours for the rest of your life. When the powerful do not take care of the poor then they will be thrown from power by the ultimate advocate, the mighty counselor who takes the side of the poor and the oppressed, the orphan and the widow.

On your journey do not fall prey to our culture of more, have a prerogative for the poor, and know that when you associate yourselves with this church you take on a certain responsibility that you may not expect, you are required to care for the least of these. Look forward to it and embrace it.