

Sermon Text for September 12, 2021

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

II Corinthians 9:6-15, II Kings 4:1-7 *“The story of the widow and the flowing oil”*

I was on a visit this week to a member of the church and they asked me: So you haven't said anything lately about the finances of the church. How are we doing? It isn't a common question that is asked to the pastor, but I can certainly understand why it was asked. Going into and going through this pandemic there were a lot of unknowns. In 2011 our budget as a church was \$413,000 and that had grown to just about \$525 when the pandemic hit. We had no idea how the pandemic was going to affect the budget of the church.

But did you notice what wasn't suspended because of a fear over finances or over what this year would hold? We didn't stop pouring money into missions, into assistance for members who lost their jobs, into getting the service out to our members who at the time were not able to come to church in person. So how are we doing with our finances? We are actually doing pretty well, thanks to your generosity and to your incredible faithfulness.

And on that note we have just launched into our stewardship Sunday for the year. I have told you in the past that every year we will hear on sermon on stewardship, and purposefully we have a representative today from one of the local organizations that we support the most to underline what your support for the mission of the church can translate into. An impact into the community. Your stewardship allows us to reach beyond these walls in ways that provide an opportunity for us to make a tremendous impact.

Today is stewardship Sunday in the midst of the stories of the Bible because each of the stories speak directly to God providing for us abundantly, and our response to that abundant provision is to understand that all we have is actually a gift from God in the first place. I have told you in the past that the purpose of stewardship Sunday is not to raise funds for the church. It is not to help improve the finances of the church. Participating in worship today, as you know, is not just those of you here in attendance. We have people worshipping from Southern Italy where Stacy and I served, and from Florida, and from countries all over the world as we gathered in Moscow and then went our separate ways.

In each of these place I have preached on tithing and the importance of tithing. This is different from preaching on a gradual increase from what you are currently giving to the ministry of the church. Preaching on tithing, giving 10 of what you have earned, is not to stabilize the financial soundness of the church, but rather I fully believe from my own experience and from

the stories I have told you over the years of those who have tithed in the churches where I have served, that tithing allows us to experience the fullness of God, and we cannot experience that fullness unless we experience the surrender to God of all things.

And while tithing is prescribed in Scripture, I have told you over the years how tithing is confirmed in life experiences. If we miss out on tithing in our lives then we are missing out on the fullness of God. Let's read.

READ

We are actually going to start this Sunday on the last Scripture that I just read, as we address the story of the widow and the flowing oil. It is thought that the prophet who died leaving his wife destitute and to the point where the creditors were about to take her sons as slaves, a practice, by the way, which was allowed in the Old Testament, was the prophet Obadiah. He is described in the same terms not only here in vs.1 as a prophet who feared the Lord, but also in I Kings 18 where he is described as a prophet who feared the Lord.

Upon his death his widow approaches the head of the prophets at that time, it would have been Elisha, and lays out her current state, probably thinking there is no way that a man of God would allow the wife and children of one of his own to undergo this cruelty and this tragedy where she suffers not only the death of her husband but the loss of her children to slavery as well.

Elisha responds in a different way. What do you want me to do about your problem, and then before she can answer he comes up with a solution. Do you own anything? Yes, just a jar of oil. Okay, great, go to all your neighbors and borrow their jars of oil, bring them all home, get your sons out there working hard going house to house, and once you have them all just start pouring. Have your sons bring the jars to you so that as one fills up the other is ready to go.

Notice, Elisha does nothing for her except provide her with a solution. Granted it is a miraculous solution, but it was one where she had to do all the work with her children. She had to see and understand what is being asked of her and take a risk and borrow those jars and then spend the time to do what he says. She does all of that.

On Tuesday in our back yard the workers were planting strawberry plants, rows upon rows of them. I'm sure you've seen how it is done, similar to tabacco. There is the driver of the tractor who drives slowly and then two people sitting on seats behind the tractor but attached to it, and then a third person just making sure all the holes are filled. As they passed me as I was watching them fascinated, the driver looks at me and said something like: It may not look like it, but I have the hard job. As those behind him are scrambling to plant the plants to keep up with

the speed of the tractor. But it was team work and they were all working hard and in unison. I was thinking of this poor widow and her sons working hard in unison to fulfill what the prophet had said, but not really knowing what the end result was going to be.

The end result is that the problem is solved, albeit by a miracle of God, but also by the work of the widows and her boys. I shared on Friday morning with the group that I struggle mightily in my ministry in understanding and walking that line between what are we called to do and what is our responsibility, and what do we leave to God to do. I am work oriented, which I think is good. But at times that orientation to work can get ahead of the type of work that God wants, which is bad. There are times when the line between our job and God's job gets blurred for me.

I heard a saying once that I like: we are called to work, work, work as if it all depends on us, but we are also called to trust, trust, trust, knowing that ultimately it only depends on God. God promises that all of our needs will be met. We believe in and operate from that promise.

We find this promise in our first reading for this morning in II Corinthians, and we will go there now. Now I have never pulled the cheerful giver card on stewardship Sunday, but since I've been here 10 years, I think I have the right to do it now. I shouldn't be embarrassed to share with you what I believe and what I have witnessed and what is fundamental to a full and complete relationship with Jesus. If you are not able to give cheerfully, and without guilt, and without a sense of wanting to show others what you give, then Scripture tell us, and I will echo it, then it is better not to give at all.

Tithing, giving 10% is for your sake, it is to strengthen and deepen your relationship with Jesus. If it is a barrier to you then don't give less, don't give at all. Wow, did I just say that? It would be like me saying that if you are not willing to pray to God consistently, then you are missing out on a full relationship with Jesus because if a person doesn't consistently pray, then you do not understand what a full relationship with God looks like. If your prayer life is limited to panic prayers, then it is better not to pray at all. It would be like if I said that how you treat your neighbor is a reflection of how we love God. If you do not love people and are not motivated in life to reach out and to love all people, or if you only love those who are like you, then it is better not to love anyone at all.

God loves a cheerful giver who wants to give not because the church tells them to, or the pastor tells them to, but because they want to. Our relationship to Jesus is not based upon a fear of going to hell, but rather a response and a celebration of what Jesus has done on the cross and so we want to give him thanks, and we do that by giving our lives to him. Paul's words on this

topic are pretty powerful. The promises of provision is found in vs.8: God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you will always have enough of everything, so you may share abundantly in every good work.

Our provisions are met not so that we can hoard them and try to enjoy them as we please. No, God provides our daily bread so that we can then reach out to others and share abundantly. Brothers and sisters, that is your legacy here at this church. How are we doing here at FPC financially, pretty well? But that isn't the point is it? How are you doing with your stewardship with God? Are you enjoying a fullness of a relationship through your tithing?

If we trust God in a few things then we will only experience the presence and power of God slightly. If we trust God in all things, then we will experience the power and the presence of God completely. While this is a stewardship sermon, I do want to take some time to thank you for your faithfulness to the church in this crazy year. It would have been easy at this stage to say that what you give to the church isn't important.

I hope and I pray the reason why you haven't said that is because you see the continued impact we are having not just on you but on the community as a whole. This week session will be made aware of some potential upcoming projects that might necessitate a capital campaign. We haven't had a capital campaign in decades. Can I tell you a secret? I have never served in a church where I have done a capital campaign. I never felt like that was a part of my calling, you know with my phobia of talking about money.

But I have told you that this time around I wanted to see what God is able to do after the church has grown and I stick around to see the next step, I don't know what that looks like. But it sounds pretty exciting to me. Now, there is nothing exciting in a capital campaign unless you are able to see the hand of God at work, through you, to meet clear needs that we might have. So stay tuned, but in the meantime, look to see how you can experience the fullness of God in many different areas of you life, including, but not limited to, your finances. Amen.