

## When Gratitude fails to prompt

‘Celebration Sunday’

November 12, 2006

*(A sermon preached by the Rev. C. Wayne Hilliker at Sydenham Street United Church)*

Resonating scripture: Mark 12:38-44

It is both a privilege and a pleasure to be here this morning. It's been almost a year and a half since I retired from your neighbouring congregation, Chalmers church and this will be my first sermon that I will have preached since that date. And what better place for this to happen than in a congregation where I have come to know so many people and ministerial colleagues. It is very special as well to have at the organ console this morning composer and choir director Dr. Fred Clarke. I also notice a number of friends from Chalmers here this morning including a family member and all of that certainly helps to make me feel very much at home.

The truth is, that following retirement in June 2005 I had sort of decided to myself at least, that I wouldn't take on any preaching engagement until 2007. However, your regular preacher here was pretty persuasive and so here I am. It is good to be here.

We bow in prayer:

*O gracious God, eternal Friend, we gather this morning as a people in the midst of world that is awash in cheap talk; a world where words can become weapons when they emerge from the mouths of those who seek to dominate.*

*Yet we keep on talking, struggling as we do now, to find a language that helps us interpret your world and connect with you and with one another in ways that bring meaning and satisfaction to our living and even to our dying.*

*With grateful hearts, we acknowledge that the right word sometimes comes to our lips, or to our ears, and when it does, it is a precious gift.*

*May these words between us become a Word beyond us and thus a word from you. May it be so. Amen.*

She is unnamed. She is a widow. She is poor. She has gone to her place of worship, the temple in Jerusalem with her last two coins in her hand. She has come to pay her tithes to the temple treasury. As far as she knew, no one even saw her. But then again, no one ever saw her. She was one of the invisible people who come and go without anyone noticing what they do. People would have looked right through her as if she were not there. Little did she know that she would be the one who would be remembered for centuries to come.

In those days there were contraptions that looked like funnels into which people threw their money. This resulted in a situation where such an offering became more or less a public sort of event. The wealthy people would come and throw in lots of coins, thus making a satisfying rattle. (Which is sort of the opposite of what happens now, because today if you hear a rattle in the offering plate, you know it is either a looney or twonie or less!)

But here this poor woman comes along and throws in two of the smallest coins. No one else notices her, no one that is, except Jesus. So he calls his disciples over to witness it, implying 'she is the one to watch'.

*"Truly I tell you," he says to them, "this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."*

I mean if you think tithing, giving 10% of your income, is heroic, try following her act! She was a percentage giver, all right---100% Now clearly we are not called to admire her because she gave all that she had to what was then a corrupt religious institution. No, that's not why this story is retained in the canon. For what is striking in this passage is that nowhere does Jesus specifically praise this woman for *what* she is doing. Instead, he simply calls his disciples over to notice her, and to *compare* what she does with what everyone else is doing. In so doing Jesus is inviting his disciples and thus us, to contemplate to contemplate the disparity between *apparent* sacrifice and the *real* thing.

Well, let's admit it---when some of you from Sydenham Street United Church woke up this morning and recalled from your last Sunday's bulletin that today was the day that you too were going to be asked to pledge, some of your money to this particular church treasury...I suspect that some of you almost decided not to come! And, no doubt, some members did decide to stay home.

It's one thing to talk about and even to share with others about what kind of volunteer time be give in and through the church, but we have this guarded privacy about our finances.

Interviewed for a magazine article, a young man indicated that he had been brought up by very progressive parents, both of whom were psychiatrists. He went on to remark, that when he was a child, his parents talked openly of politics and sex and religion, but whenever they talked about money, they went into the bedroom and closed the door.

I spent some time going to the Sydenham Street United Church webpage. I read, your fall newsletter, the bulletin announcements of your life and work, and the engaging “living stones” sermons that have been offered in this sanctuary. ( I was going to say from this pulpit but then I recalled that your minister has more of a wandering style in preaching than my own fixation with the pulpit☺) In discovering all that you are attempting to be and do, it is clear that there is a strong commitment on the part of the core of this congregation to support it’s life and work, it’s worship and it’s witness in this community.

There will be real cause for celebration on this Sunday if that core can be strengthened and enlarged. When you think about it, in some ways we get the kind of church we deserve. For either we take individual responsibility in shaping our future as a people of God in this place, or the future will end up shaping us in ways that just leave it to chance. So when those of you who identify yourselves as members or supporters of this congregation sign on the dotted line, what will you decide to do and why will you do it?

When I thought about some aspects of what is happening today at the conclusion of today’s service, my mind went back to a particular cartoon. In it a worshipper is depicted leaving church following a Stewardship sermon and makes this comment at the door to the preacher.

*"When you said that you didn't know where on earth the money was going to come from in order to pay for all the necessary church expenditures, we were really relieved. For we thought that you thought the money was coming from us!"*

There are a lot of Stewardship sermons that are preached that simply make the listener feel guilty. I know, I've preached some of them. But guilt is never a lasting basis for steadfast commitment. We don't need to be made to feel guilty. Duty only calls, when gratitude fails to prompt.

It is writer, teacher and preacher Thomas Long, (whom I hope many of you will come to hear when he speaks on Saturday December 9<sup>th</sup>, details of which are printed in today’s bulletin,) who tells about a group which called itself the “Searchers Class”. They had called themselves that since the time, more than ten years before, when as young adults, they had

formed an alternative adult church school class. As the “searchers” crept into middle age, the act of searching itself seemed to take more and more energy. Indeed, the whole business of being a part of the church at all felt, at times, like a burdensome weight. On this Sunday morning that weight had tugged the conversation toward the question: *‘Why stay in the church?’*

Suddenly, one of the men in the group spoke up. Punching the air with his finger, and pronouncing every word with force, he said: *“I’ll tell you what keeps me coming to this church?”* ...and every head turned in his direction. The sudden rush of interest made him hesitate, uncertain of his own thought, but he pushed on. *“It’s strange, I know, but I get the feeling here, like nowhere else, that something is about to happen.”*

All of us have known in small ways, the energy an eagerly anticipated future can give to our actions in the present. The expectant parents who find joy in what would otherwise be toil:

- ...assembling the crib, (or cribs),
- ...painting or wallpapering the nursery,
- ...practicing the pushing and breathing.

Christmas itself has that kind of power. People brave crowds again and again at the shopping mall to purchase chosen gifts, then carefully wrap them. Delicate hand carved nativity scenes are dusted and set, piece by piece, on the fireplace mantle or shelf. Every action has meaning, because something is about to happen.

But we have also known the sense of loss and disappointment over a hoped-for future which does not come, when nothing, really happens. The husband and wife who try to conceive a child in vain. Even Christmas day has its own measure of disappointment. The packages are opened, the gifts admired and put away, the tree comes down, the shepherds and angels are stored away for another year, and the long awaited day passes with a sense that nothing, nothing really, has happened.

In a far more profound way, the church, right from its very beginning, has always struggled with its pain over a future which fails to come. ‘Come Lord Jesus come’, but only the Romans came. Peace and Justice and food for all, ‘thy kingdom come’...has been the prayerful cry of many. But poverty remains and injustices persist and wars rule the day. One can live on tiptoe just so long, before the muscles grow tired and the eyes grow weary of looking for the light of a day which never dawns.

That can happen with us in terms of our support of the church. We can grow tired. And we can start looking for our renewal in other less demanding places. It is a good question—why stay in the church?

Now people can look upon the church in a variety of ways. Novelist John Updike—*“In general that churches (I visited)...bore for me the same relation to God that billboards did to Coca-Cola: they promoted thirst without quenching it.”* Writer Ronald Blythe---*“As for British worshippers, they go to church as they go to the washroom, with the minimum of fuss and no explanation if they can help it.”*

Somewhere I read about a conversation which took place between theologians Paul Tillich and John Oldham as they lunched one day in London, England. Oldham told Tillich:

*“Christianity has no meaning for me whatsoever apart from the Church, but I sometimes feel as though the Church as it actually exists is the source of all my doubts and difficulties.”*

There may be good reasons to leave a church. There are probably even some good reasons to leave the church altogether. However, if the main reason is that I cannot find a community of faith that agrees with me on everything--- from what kind of music we should play or hymns we should sing; to where we should stand on the issue of abortion, or same-sex marriage; or how I feel about particular marketing ads; ...then I have the perfect excuse never to belong to a church with more than one member (me). The fact of the matter is that there is no perfect church, no perfect congregation, no perfect denomination, any more than there is a perfect Bible, if perfect means that I understand, agree, or approve of everything that goes on it.

Years ago, a sociologist by the name of Ferdinand Toennies, criticized the role of the market in creating a society in which there was no real community, but rather only individuals who approached others with the attitude—*“I give so that you will give back to me.”*

What if the church serves people, not as a market transaction, but because it believes itself to be a people of God with a message that is life-giving? What if we engage and support outreach projects, and you have a long history of admirable commitment in that area, what if we do that not because we want to be seen as do-gooders but rather because we believe in a God who calls us to give of ourselves in that way---a God who calls us to be in caring relationship with others near and far away. Indeed, if the overarching biblical message can be trusted, it means that we are created for that very purpose. Whenever then we settle down to any style of living that doesn't bring us into caring relationships with others, and with our world, then there will be a restlessness within us. For we will be denying our intended creation.

And what about worship? What if the choir works hard on their anthem, not simply because they hope we will like it but rather because the singers believe that we are called to offer

praise as a sign of God's rule and reign in this world? And what about the singing of hymns? What is at the heart of that activity? When somebody leaves a service and says, "*Frankly, that last hymn didn't do a thing for me.*" Well, one part of me wants to say, '*so what?*' For at the deepest level, we are not singing hymns just for you or just for me. Worship isn't for us. It's for God. That's why we call it a "service" of worship—it is the service we render to the Holy one, the One who is full of mystery and awe, the One who graces us with a costly, unconditional acceptance, the One whose love has placed a value on us that nothing can sever, not even death.

So we do well, in choosing hymns, for example, not just to ask, "*Does the congregation like this one?*" or '*Will the organist be willing to play this one*' or "*Is this hymn set to really good music?*" Rather, the deeper question is a theological one, namely—"Who is the God who is being praised by this hymn?" and "*What sort of disciples are being formed by singing this?*" In fact, there is a very real sense in which a church, any church, is being formed, or malformed, by its praise.

And what about the sermon? What if I'm preaching this sermon, not because I think it's uppermost on your list of weekly wants, but rather because I believe there is a living word from God that struggles to be heard by you and by me. For it is in and through the Church, we come up against something claiming us for what we alone can be. It may be a moment when we discover ourselves to be living in a state of falsehood and realize that some kind of new life of integrity beckons. It may be hearing a claim which calls us in the direction of willing someone's well-being when we were starting to move toward that person in a mode of revenge. Or, we may have come seeking mere fellowship with other people only to be astounded by encountering friendship with God.

The fact of the matter is that we have been blessed in a thousand ways. Most of us would have to say that we are the most privileged people who have ever lived on this planet in terms of the freedom and security that still is ours in this country we call our home, with all of its ample resources. And some of us would go further and say that among those privileges and freedoms we deeply value, are the ones associated with being part of a community of faith like this one.

Mind you, when you think about it, a gathered congregation is a peculiar thing. For almost every congregation ends up being a mixed bag of people. You can test this out----take a look around you this morning and you will likely see somewhere in this sanctuary, at least several people you would not choose to be with in any other setting. But be assured, also, that others are looking in your direction and saying the same thing.

The truth is that we will always be able to find a reason for not staying in the church and for not giving generously. We will always be able to find some policy or pronouncement by some Moderator, with which we disagree. We will always encounter some program that is supported by some committee, or council or Presbytery or task force or fund of the church, that we have great difficulty with. We will always be able to identify particular issues that we view from a different perspective than the one, say, who is regularly preaching in this sanctuary. We will always have at times differing opinions from those who gather to make decisions as a Council on our behalf.

We will always discover that as individual members of a congregational family we do not hold identical beliefs about God—or about Jesus of Nazareth— or about interpretations of scripture. We will always encounter people in the midst of our congregational family whose personality -or attitudes -or life-style -or political views, -or temperament rub us the wrong way. As one line of doggerel reminds us:

*"To live in love  
with saints above  
that will, indeed, be glory.  
To live below  
with those I know  
Ah! that's a different story!"*

The plain truth is that we are not called upon to be a community of like-minded people. Sometimes our disagreements are mild--other times they may be very intense. But our unity as Christians in this church or any other, never has been based on agreement. Rather our unity is based on the mutual concern we share for the things of Christ...of justice, of peace, of costly hospitality. Part of that concern is expressed in widening the circles of our our compassion. And for many here this morning, a goodly part of that mutual concern is lived out through the people and programs and projects of this church.

And no wonder. For this is a congregation that has been faithful to the task

...of risking theological diversity;

...of lifting up a vision of a God who both calls us into question and nurtures us in hope;

...of pointing to Jesus as the deepest probe into the meaning of human existence that we have been given and the clearest window we have into the nature and being of God;

..of refusing to give in to a narrow sectarian definition of faith or practice, and have

found the courage to face moral ambiguity and uncertainty without absolutizing texts of scripture;  
...of facing the challenge of discovering new metaphors for our experience of God and new patterns of language for our prayers and praise and proclamation.

If then we truly believe, and I mean really believe, that the health and wholeness of our ourselves and the wider community is closely connected to the strengthening of a community of faith such as this one; and if we genuinely believe that what goes on in here does, in fact, make a difference to what goes on out there--- then we will want to put some substantial part of ourselves, ...be it our time, ...be it our energy,... be it our prayers, ...be it our financial resources,---into this congregational setting that many of you call your spiritual home.

For duty only calls when gratitude fails to prompt.

So let us, as the apostle Paul puts it—“*consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*”

As a now-retired preacher in a neighbouring church used to remind himself and his people at the conclusion to every service he conducted, ‘Life is short and we do not have too much time to gladden the hearts and the minds and the wills of those who travel the way with us, so be swift to love, and make haste to be kind and just.

Amen and amen.

**Today we all are called to be disciples.** Hymn # 507 in VOICES UNITED.

\* \* \* \* \*