

“Plain Talk about Stewardship: For You”  
 Delivered Sunday, September 13, 2009  
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 Mark 8:22-26  
 For You, for Shandon, for God Series

With the beginning of the fall program and cooler weather on the way, it’s stewardship season again and I know all of you look forward to it as much as tailgating at the football games! And I look forward to it too, because when the church starts talking about money, I know it’s just a matter of time before someone will get mad. I heard about it just last week. I said to a church member, “you know I haven’t seen so-and-so in a while, do you know what’s going on?” “Oh... he got mad when the Finance Committee sent a letter asking people to catch up on their pledges, and he hasn’t been back since.” Happens all the time, talk about money makes people angry, and I understand that because it taps into deep wells of emotion. How we make and use our money is personal because it represents what we value, and a lot of people don’t like to talk about it. Anyone who has done pre-marital counseling with me knows I hit the money issue hard because it can be a source of great stress within marriages. On the one hand, money is simply a tangible currency of exchange, but on the other hand money is highly symbolic of a complex web of conscious and unconscious associations – things like our sense of security, self-worth, priorities, commitments, values.

If some people are uncomfortable around issues of money within marriages, we can certainly see why stewardship is a challenge for our church home. I do understand the challenge, but I’d also like to say that this discomfort can be a bit perplexing for the preacher – I’ll admit it. I spent the summer preaching about King David – murder, adultery, sex, violence and revenge – and we could hardly keep the CD’s in stock, so popular were those topics. But I know when I say the “money” word from the pulpit, I’ll hear about it and it will not be a request for a copy of the sermon. Be that as it may, here we go, with a series of sermons based on the theme the Stewardship Committee has chosen for this year: For You, For Shandon, For God. We will explore some biblical foundations for why stewardship is so important – not just for the church’s Fall campaign, but in our relationship with the living God.

As in every other avenue of life, the tangible resource of money represents so many intangibles. The Bible helps us probe these intangibles – with story after story of things like our sense of security, self-worth, priorities, commitments, values. Today’s scripture reading of is a curious little healing story about precisely that – the tangible representing the intangible. No where else in all of the gospels does it take Jesus a second try to complete a miracle! A “do-over” we might say today. When the paralytic was laid out on the stretcher and brought in by his friends, Jesus simply said “Stand up, take your mat and go home,” and the man got up. When the windstorm arose on the lake and the waves beat into the boat, Jesus simply said, “Peace! Be still!” and the water became as still as glass. Jairus’ daughter was dead so long the musicians had arrived for the funeral, but when Jesus said, “Little girl, get up!” -- immediately she got up. Five loaves and two fish multiplied into a picnic for five thousand with little more than a blessing, and when Jesus stepped out onto the water he walked across it as if on dry land. None of his miracles take a second thought.

That is... until the one before us today, so we cannot help but pause before this curious description of a partial healing and wonder: Why did Jesus have to ask the man of Bethsaida,

“Can you see now?” Why did the man reply: “Well sort of, but the people look more like trees walking,” and why on earth did Jesus need a second attempt to get the healing right? Was Jesus’ God-given power a little off that day? Was the man’s faith not quite up to par the first go around? What’s up with this process of healing as opposed to an automatic cure?

According to biblical scholars this healing story has a very important role to play in the gospel precisely because of this curious two-step detail, the wonder that it invokes, and its uniqueness among the lineup of all the other more immediate miracles. At this point in the gospel, by the eighth chapter, Jesus - frankly - no longer needs to prove his healing, life-giving power. “Been there done that,” he might say. No, by this time a shift is taking place; Jesus is turning his head toward Jerusalem, where he will lay down his life for those who follow him. There is something more at stake than Jesus’ proving his healing power, there is something more here than the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy that he will restore sight to the blind, there is something else he wants us to see.

In his commentary on Mark, Lamar Williamson writes: “Seeing in this passage moves to two levels of meaning. At the first level, seeing refers of physical vision. The passage demonstrates that Jesus has power to heal the blind. (Then) at a second, symbolic level, seeing refers to inner perception or understanding. ... What the reader has been led to see of Jesus up to this point, namely his wonder-working power, his authority to forgive sins, and his enormous popularity with the crowds, represents only a partial vision of who his is. (Here) we are invited to look again and more intently as the story of Jesus unfolds.” (1)

Simply put, on his way to the cross, Jesus wants more for his disciples than just our being able to see well enough to get around. He wants us to be transformed at a spiritual level so that we can see how every grace and every blessing is a gift from God. Mark’s telling of this two-part restoration of one person’s vision is intended to help all of us see – at that deep and personal level – the life we receive through Jesus Christ.

That is the fundamental basis of all stewardship. Stewardship never begins with money. It begins with gratitude – the faithful recognition that life itself is a gift from God, and eternal life has been won for us through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Like this two-part healing of the blind man from Bethsaida, stewardship has a physical dimension to be sure, and that physical dimension has to do with the tangible expression of our gratitude to God. But stewardship has a spiritual dimension that goes deeper than any talk about money, which has to do with our perspective on life, with the priorities we have, with the commitments we make – with the way we really see.

The singer and songwriter, Mary Chapin Carpenter, had a two-part healing that led to this kind of spiritual depth. She tells about it in an essay entitled “The Learning Curve of Gratitude,” for National Public Radio’s This I Believe. Mary Chapin Carpenter has won five Grammy Awards and has sold over 13 million records, but she learned gratitude through a two-step healing process. Just before she was to go on a concert tour, she suffered a pulmonary embolism. Blood clots in her lungs left her breathless and in severe pain and landed her in the hospital with a canceled concert tour. In her own words she said, “Everyone told me how lucky I was. A pulmonary embolism can take your life in an instant. I was familiar enough with the medical term, but not familiar with the pain, the fear and the depression that followed. Everything I had been looking forward to came to a screeching halt. I had to cancel my upcoming tour...let my musicians and crewmembers go. The record company, the booking agency; I felt that I had let everyone down. But there was nothing to do but get out of the hospital, go home and get well. I tried hard to see my unexpected time off as a gift, but I would open a novel and couldn’t

concentrate. I would turn on the radio and shut it off. This unexpected time was becoming a curse, filling me with anxiety, fear and self-loathing – all the ingredients of the darkness that is depression.”

But then she experienced a second healing touch saying, “Sometimes, it’s the smile of a stranger that helps. Sometimes it’s a phone call from a long absent friend, checking on you.

I found my lifeline at the grocery store. One morning, the young man who rang up my groceries and asked me if I wanted paper or plastic, also told me to enjoy the rest of my day. I looked at him and I knew he meant it. It stopped me in my tracks. I went out and I sat in my car and cried. What I want more than ever is to appreciate that I have this day, and tomorrow and hopefully days beyond that. I am experiencing the learning curve of gratitude. I don’t want to say “have a nice day” like a robot. I don’t want to get mad at the elderly driver in front of me. I don’t want to go crazy when my Internet access is messed up. I don’t want to be jealous of someone else’s success. You could say this litany of sins indicates that I don’t want to be human. The learning curve of gratitude, however, is showing me exactly how human I am. Tonight I will cook dinner, tell my husband how much I love him, curl up with the dogs, watch the sun go down over the mountains and climb into bed. I will think about how uncomplicated it all is. I will wonder how it took me my entire life to appreciate just one day.” (2)

Now that is the two-part healing Jesus wants for all of us. To see – from deep down within us – the source of life, to recognize the gift of just one day. The learning curve of gratitude is the basis of any talk of stewardship in the church and why we give. It is as uncomplicated as this: For you today, this day and all that is in it, is nothing more and nothing less, than a gift from God. “Jesus’ question for all of us is – “Can you see now?”

#### NOTES

1) Lamar Williamson, Mark: Interpretation Commentary, p. 148.

2) Mary Chapin Carpenter, This I Believe for National Public Radio, June 24, 2007.