

All That She Had

November 10, 2024

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The Gospel passage I just read is often called the “Widow’s Mite,” a “mite” being a term for the small copper coins the widow gave as her offering. It’s a story of someone giving, not out of their abundance, not out of their excess, but sacrificially, substantially.

At first blush, it would seem like the easiest of connections to tie up our fall pledge drive – a passage about giving wholeheartedly. But, if you’ve been worshipping with us for a while and know me, you know that the easy route is rarely the direction I take things, if for no other reason than there’s always so much more going on.

Take today’s text, for example. We’ll get to the idea of encouraging a generosity mindset shortly, but not before noting that even more than fostering selflessness and other-mindedness, this Gospel passage is a critique of predatory leaders. Jesus points to the example of the woman giving sacrificially as a criticism of the scribes who love to be seen as important while at the same time, in Jesus’ words, “devouring widows’ houses.” Taking advantage of vulnerable people is not and never has been a biblical value.

Before the folks on our church’s Generosity Team have a conniption fit over the fact that I could have offered a nice, perhaps even meaningful sermon about being generous and instead am talking about predatory leadership, allow me to say this: taking bold stands, even when it’s hard, is this church’s hallmark. Being prophetic, even if it means being small because we root ourselves in honesty and compassion and justice, rather than convenience or even opportunism, is at the core of who we are. It’s at the center of our pledge drive theme this year, “Because of YOU, Union Church changes lives.” And so, even though it would be an easy line to draw for me to say, “See, the widow in our Gospel story gave everything she had, and therefore you should, too,” that’s not what I’m going to do here.

Instead, we’re going to have one more testimonial from one of our church members, one more testimonial about how Union, in taking the hard road and being prophetic, takes our core value of changing people’s lives seriously. With that, I ask you to join me in warmly welcoming our Education Ministry Chair, Beth Piontek.

Back in September, Bridget asked in Common Ministry if there were volunteers for people who would give testimonials in church this fall and, you know, I think everyone at Common Ministry is pretty familiar with my writing, and so people were kind of looking at me, and I knew it, but I’m not as confident a speaker as I am a writer, so I agreed to this, but it was definitely with some trepidation, for sure.

As you can clearly see, I’m a crier, so this should be fun. But I did agree, and I got home that evening, and my parents had recently deposited some “treasures” from my childhood bedroom into my garage. It was like boxes of junk, mostly, but I was going through some of them; I was in a jewelry box and I was looking for my high school class ring, and I did not find my high school class ring, although I found my mom’s high school class ring, no idea why that was in there, but what I did find is this sheet of notebook paper, folded into sixteenths, and I knew right away what that was.

So I unfolded it, and this is the outline of the senior speech that I gave from this pulpit in May of 2004, just a couple weeks before I graduated from high school. And I've saved this, all this time. I gave a speech at my high school graduation too. I have no idea, I mean, I have *some* idea what that said, but I know it wasn't what I wanted it to say because I'd been warned that they would cut my mic if I was incendiary. So I talked about the Latin root of the word "commencement," which I did not care about at all. And I'm sure I don't have a copy of that; I can't imagine why I would have a copy of that. But it's been 20 years and I have these hand-written notes that I wrote when I was 18 years old, and I'm standing in the same pulpit 20 years later, and I think I could probably stop speaking now and you guys would all know what Union Church has meant to my life, right?

Anyway, the first point on my outline is that, when I joined YCA, which is "Young Christians in Action," it was the name of the high school youth group at this church at that time, it was against my will. And that was definitely true. It was definitely true. My parents had joined this church towards the end of my eighth-grade year, and within a couple weeks of the time when I had lost my best friend to suicide. The other girls my age at this church, they had known one another forever; their parents were friends with each other, some of them lived on the same block or within walking distance of one another, they'd known each other since they were preschoolers. And I...you know, I was different; I was big and I was loud and I was brassy and I was rough around the edges, none of which has really changed, I just think it's funnier now. So I just didn't really think that I would have a place here. But what I didn't write on the outline is that I was 14 years old and I had already started to use the way that people and organizations think and speak (mostly speak, I don't know how people think – I'm not in their heads) about mental health concerns, and suicide specifically, as a litmus test for whether those people and organizations would be safe for me to trust. I'd heard plenty at school from my peers, from teachers, unfortunately, you know, things about how my best friend was in hell because she'd sinned against God when she'd killed herself and this sort of language, and I just, I was very, very skeptical of any church. So obviously Union overcame that barrier for me, and I would say that one of the things that makes me proudest to belong to this congregation is its commitment to growth in the way that it looks at these sorts of issues, including the recent and ongoing discussion around becoming a WISE congregation which, for those of you who aren't aware, means "Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive, and Engaged in the mental health of the community and the wider world." If how people and organizations speak and think about suicide is my litmus test for whether they can be trusted, then I would say that Union Church is the benchmark against which I might measure other organizations.

And that's not just true in the case of mental health and suicide – this is true for other things too. When I was in my mid-20s, I was in a graduate program in Pittsburgh which, on the whole, was not a success for me. But one of my classmates was a man who was about twice my age, and he was an ordained Presbyterian minister, and he was also gay. He was pursuing an academic degree instead of serving a congregation because he had been outed as gay at the church he'd last served, and, at that time, the Presbyterian church still did not ordain openly gay clergy. And so they did not defrock him, but he also wasn't allowed to serve a congregation, although he, in fact was married to a woman; she was his best friend from college and an incredibly cool person, who absolutely understood his sexuality, but because he was known to be gay, he was pursuing this academic degree instead of serving a congregation. And so he and I

were quite close, and I would go with him occasionally to a Presbyterian church in Pittsburgh that he liked to attend, but I did not go with him regularly and I never joined that church – I just couldn't bring myself to because I was so disheartened by the way that his faith tradition had treated him versus what Union Church had taught me that I might reasonably expect.

The next point on this outline is that, quote, "A lot of the best times are thanks to good advisors." I will say that that's certainly true. I have notes here that I should thank Marcia Martin for all of the car rides home and for being my confidante. The first time I met Marcia, she was wearing this bunny nametag, it said "Miss Marcia" on it, and I quickly came to understand that that's because she was also a preschool teacher in the Mayflower classrooms downstairs, and she'd come from a Mayflower parent event to a youth group parent event, but I met her, and she's got this bunny nametag on, and it says "Miss Marcia," and I thought to myself "oh no..." I would happily have called her Mrs. Martin, no problem, but I didn't not want to be a teenager having to refer to her as Miss Marcia and have her think that, I don't know, bunnies, and I think the other classroom was ducks, bunnies and ducks were thematically appropriate for whatever we were doing in high school. Terrifying. So, thank goodness, I misunderstood the circumstances.

Marcia turned out to be great! She knew, I don't know how, but I assume that all the adults knew, really, about how my best friend had died and she got me alone – this would not fly today, by the way, this is not Safe Sanctuary – but she got me alone in her car, and it was a 25-minute drive home and she had me locked in there, and she said "so tell me about that," and she just went for it. And that was very Marcia. It was intimidating, but I also appreciated it – an adult who understood that I had been changed in some significant way and was willing to acknowledge that. I'm very, very lucky to be able to repeat that thank you to Marcia verbatim again today. I still appreciate it.

I noted on my outline that I should thank Jeff Larson for all of the pictures, flattering and unflattering... Some of them probably were a little unflattering, but that also is more cutting than I wish that I had been. I think I didn't appreciate at 18 what a gift it was to have an adult in my life who saw kids being kids as a subject worthy of documentation, and Jeff did, and I'm very grateful for that.

I noted that I should thank Linda Larson for always treating me like an adult, and, as with what I said to Marcia, I'm grateful to be able to offer that thank you verbatim again today. It can be really hard to be an adult in an environment where you grew up. You know, I am plenty old enough to refinance a mortgage. I'm old enough to be the person that people at work call when they want to understand what the insurance benefits mean without the HR-speak. But am I old enough to call Mr. and Mrs. Tucker Ed and Sue? Unclear. So the way Linda has always treated me and continues to treat me is very well appreciated.

As far as advisors go, the last thing that I noted here was that I called – I wrote down, "Mel Polarek, you're Papa M, what more can I say?" I have *no* recollection of calling Mel that, although I would assume that I did, but what I will say is that decades before anyone had ever used or heard the term "dad energy," everyone who knew Mel, knew that Mel had the best dad

energy, for sure, and, you know, I still hear the absence of his laughter every week when I enter the sanctuary.

I don't know very many people who receive the gift of the love, support, and care of so many devoted adults as teenagers, and I know even fewer who've received that so far into their adulthoods. I've shared before, in writing, that one of my favorite memories from our wedding day is that, towards the end of the reception, after the photographer had gone home, I looked up from dancing with my husband, Brett, and I realized that the Martins, the Larsons, and the Polareks had all surrounded us, and were dancing around us, kind of similar to the Circle of Friends that the youth group used to do to end every meeting. That remains one of the most visceral reminders I've experienced of the way that this congregation takes the promises that it makes at the points of baptism or marriage or new membership, and all the critical moments here, and it really puts faith into action.

It is largely the influence of these advisors that has inspired my continued investment in this church – in time, in finances, in effort. The return on my investment has been infinitely greater than anything I'm capable of putting in. I think all of you know and see the people here every week who love my child. And, in addition to that, I have had, over the course of more than 15 years now, on and off, the opportunity to continue to participate in the lives of the youth of this congregation as an advisor, something that I always have and continue to look forward to each Wednesday. When my first group of high school youth group kids graduated, about ten or eleven years ago now, we still had the YCA Sunday ritual, and after their YCA Sunday we were up in the fellowship hall, and I remember telling each of them, that I loved them and I was proud of them, and that's still true. That's true for those kids (who are not kids, they're 30ish), it's true for the kids I get to see on Wednesday nights now, it's true for the kids sitting in the Prayground where my kid usually is, and that will never change.

Towards the end of my speech, I had noted that I was grateful for the friendships that I had formed growing up at Union and I specifically noted that it was the first time in my life that I'd had more than two close female friends. I'm very fortunate to be able to say that I've formed close friendships in many stages of my life, now – and more than two of them, luckily. But what I had no way of knowing then was how difficult it is to form a network of *shared* friends like the one that I had as a teenager here at Union. And I had no idea that it would be nearly 20 years before I would experience that again, and it would be mostly from the efforts of people here who are really invested in forming community.

I have a habit of emailing articles to myself, so I've got this email chain that's like hundreds of messages long, it spans back years, and I'm the only person on it. But one of the pieces that I emailed myself at one point in time was a piece called "Sick Woman Theory (2020)." It's by Johanna Hedva, and it's really about – I emailed it to myself when my sister had had a very serious back injury – and this piece is about how people dealing with chronic health conditions, or who have been marginalized in other ways, might be able to engage with the world privately, when the ways that they're able to do so publicly have been limited, and it's kind of a response to Hannah Arendt's idea of the political occurring in public. So I was reading that recently – I came across it in my phone again this week – and I was really struck that there was a section near the end where Hedva writes that:

[To] protest is to care for another and to care for yourself. To take on the historically feminized and therefore invisible practice of nursing, nurturing, and caring. To take seriously each other's vulnerability, fragility, and precarity, and to support it, honor it, empower it. To protect each other, to enact and practice community. A radical kinship, an interdependent sociality, a politics of care.

And this, in no small part, is what Union Church has continued to provide to me, especially recently. When the normal pathways through which we might achieve our goals are not available or they do not work the way that we want them to, we, like the woman in today's gospel reading, can still go on caring for one another and for the world around us. In the past year, I've been welcomed into the homes of other people, and I've welcomed them into my home too, and that's not something I do. This community has provided me with a source of love that is grounded and consistent and also a source of joy, and there are friendships that are built upon a commitment to sustaining one another and to filling one another's cups, whether literally or figuratively, and to bearing witness to the parts of one another's lives that may have left us feeling unseen or unheard. Free from some of the expectations that are sometimes attendant to even our best and most important familial or romantic relationships, friendship and the love of community continue to have a life-changing presence in my life, and continue to be among the things I value most here at Union.

I closed my senior speech with a quote from a Green Day song, which I'd just as soon not admit to – those of you who are my age know exactly what song this is and you're laughing because, yeah, correct – it's *so* contrived and *so* unoriginal and I would just as soon have not done that, but, you know, I was 18, and if that's the worst thing that I said it was probably not *that* bad. But I also remember that I considered using lyrics from both Sublime and Nirvana to close the speech, and I decided against them because I didn't want to get in trouble with my parents because I was keeping my contraband CDs from those bands in my locker at school, and I didn't want to explain why I was so familiar with the lyrics. So I am glad that I opted against the Sublime song – again, those of you who are familiar are like “yeah, there's nothing there to offer,” – but I do kind of wish that I had gone with something from Nirvana, because even today I have a wall-hanging, it's candy-colored, it says “Come as You Are,” which is the title of a Nirvana song, if you're not really into grunge music from 1991, and this wall-hanging is hanging in my porch, it's right next to the front door, and it really sums up the way that I continue to strive – imperfectly – to accept others, but also the way that I feel that Union – generally more effectively – does, a radical and unconditional acceptance and care, which only grows in value and importance, and which I hope to remain all in on for the rest of my life. Thank you.

Conclusion

Thank you, Beth. As you heard from Beth, Union isn't just a church that exists for itself, isn't a community people belong to merely to build up their own spirituality. It's a church that changes people's lives, that makes real impacts in real time. It's a church that dedicates its work to collaborating with God to bring about the Kingdom of God, not just for ourselves, but for all. To those of you who have already made your pledges to our ministry for 2025, thank you. To those of you who haven't yet shared your financial intentions for next year, please do so soon.

Our goal is to raise \$75,000 more in pledges this year than we did last year, in order to be able to pay our staff competitively and continue our current ministries in this current economic climate. Our follow-up team will begin reaching out this week to those of you we haven't yet heard from. Of course, we understand that some are unable to pledge at this time. Simply let us know if that is the case.

Friends, it's not merely a slogan when we say, "Because of YOU, Union Church changes lives." Thank you to you all for the many ways that you make this theme a reality.

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Psalm 146, Mark 12:38-44
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