

THE WIDOWS MITE
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Psalm 127

Unless it is the Lord who builds the house, the builders' work is pointless. Unless it is the Lord who protects the city, the guard on duty is pointless.

²It is pointless that you get up early and stay up late, eating the bread of hard labor because God gives sleep to those he loves.

Mark 12:38-44, 13:1-2

³⁸In his teaching Jesus said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! ³⁹They devour widows' houses and say long prayers for appearance's sake. They will receive the greater condemnation."

⁴⁰And Jesus sat down opposite the treasury, and was observing how the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴¹A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth, together, a penny. ⁴²Then Jesus called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴³For they all put in out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole livelihood." ⁴⁴As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, how grand the stones and buildings are!" ⁴⁵Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

This is the Word of the Lord... Thanks be to God.

Last fall, I had the privilege of visiting this Presbytery's Mission Partners in Illubabor Bethel Synod, in central Ethiopia.

It was a long flight...15 hours.

The old joke right now would be "and boy, are my arms tired!"

Except it's not my arms that are tired, it was - and is my heart, and my brain, and my soul.

I had not been to Ethiopia before, but I have traveled, both as a mission team worker and a family member, to developing countries.

And even though you know, going in, there will be poverty... You don't really realize the extent of it, until you meet it face to face, until it confronts you with its dirt, and smell, and hunger and disease... all preventable. With homeless people living in bus shelters on the street, or in these small containers made of corrugated metal, that look most of all like a coffin. With whole families living in huts that have, if they are lucky, metal roofs and a door that can close, with dirt floors that flood at every rain, with virtually no safe water to drink—except to buy, which the poorest cannot afford to do.

I imagine, Jesus was tired, that day in Jerusalem, when he sat down opposite the Treasury, to observe.

Jesus has already cleared out the Temple- tossed tables, ran people out who were selling and charging and changing money.... This was the act that would inspire the chief priests and scribes to look for a way to kill him.

And Jesus, sitting opposite the Treasury, tells his disciples... meaning the church... meaning us...

“Beware” ... Beware of the religious experts, the canon lawyers, the big wigs, the Presbytery and General Assembly staff....

Who like to walk around in long robes, and be treated with respect, and have the best seats in the house. Beware... for they speak extra long, extravagantly worded prayers, all for the appearance of holiness...

Even while they are robbing from the poor, from the widows— devouring them.

And then Jesus notices... a widow. Who puts in 2 copper coins, the smallest kind there is... so small that that together, they equal only a penny.

Now, the rich people have put in lots of money... large sums. But the widow put in her 2 cents worth- literally, her whole life—all that she had.

Jesus is not saying here that money is evil. Money, in fact, can do great good. While in Ethiopia, we were able to visit the ICare home for students in Gore, which this Presbytery supports... and all of the children were healthy, and vital, and strong. We had a great time- we visited with some of the students we support, and worked in the library a bit, and helped some of the kids with their English. This Presbytery recently sent money to the orphanage, for new mattresses, so the students can get a good nights sleep.

We were also able to see the Algae clinic, and the Bethel Mekane Yesus School in Addis- which used to be only for girls, but now takes boy students as well, even in night classes, for those who have to work during the day. The students were well spoken, with impeccable English skills- which will allow them to go to college after high school- the entrance exam demands aptitude in English- and the school boasts of a 100% admittance rate to University.

Because of our support, the churches in Mettu are able to provide housing for widows, and to start a savings and credit bureau, which gives micro-loans to the women to start small businesses. The women pay a portion of their income back into a common fund, to be lent out to other widows and women starting businesses.

Your prayers, and your support, are all at work. Our support, as a Presbytery, shows that we both believe and live out our commitment not just to ourselves, not to just our place in society- with long robes and fancy speeches and the best seats of honor- but to our brothers and sisters in Christ- and to Christ, himself, who was one of the poor ones.

In my visit to Ethiopia, I preached in, and visited many more, congregations. All of the churches I visited were growing. So much so that virtually every church was in the middle of expanding its physical plant (some of which are literally a kind of pole barn, with corrugated metal roofs and dirt floors), others of which are commencing a capital campaign, or starting satellite churches. Some congregations, unable to physically spread out their walls, set up “overflow seating”- building pavilions up against the outside church wall, with benches and speakers, so that the people could hear.

Every church I attended had more children for its children's blessing, than we have in many of our congregations here in Shenandoah Presbytery.

And I began to wonder, what is different? Why are they growing, and so many of our congregations are dying?

Why did this Presbytery last year dissolve a congregation... when in Ethiopia they are adding more and more to their numbers every week? Certainly, the contexts are different. And I firmly believe God places us in a particular time and place, for a reason.

But I also wondered if we are not blinded, are not hobbled, by our relative wealth. If we are more concerned about our appearances, more concerned about getting the best seats, than in sacrificial living. One of the things we heard, again and again, was that the pastors in the local congregations were dealing with the Prosperity Gospel—the idea that if God loves you, God will give you money, or a car, or a fancy house, and if you don't have those things, God is angry with you, and the way to get right with God is to give more money to the church... and by extension, the pastor, who somehow always has a nice house, and a nice car, and really fancy, good looking suits.

The local pastors do not know how to combat it, how to effectively show it for what it is- which is, in effect, a con game played on the weakest and most vulnerable members... and so we were asked to preach about it.

Which I found very difficult- not because I support any kind of prosperity gospel... as if it even was a kind of gospel... but because I come from a wealthy country... with big church buildings, and a large Presbytery budget. I have a car- I do not walk 2 hours one way to get to a meagerly paying teaching job. I have health care, and clean running water at the turn of the tap.

And so telling people not to seek betterment in their lives seemed a sham, and made me feel as if I were one of the scribes, in a long robe, and with long words...

I preached, I hope, faithfully. I pray I preached for the glory of God, and not my own glory.

Upon leaving the Temple area, after seeing the widow make her offering, the disciples, a little foolishly, a little wonder-struck at the Temple building and say "Look Jesus! Those stones are SO BIG!"

Jesus tells them "don't be fooled. Even these stones will be torn down."

This is understood to be a prophetic statement- that the Temple will be useless, not only because the Romans will tear it down, but also because Jesus, in his sacrifice on the cross, will make the Temple obsolete. Unnecessary.

The widow's sacrifice is also said to be prophetic- that it prefigures Jesus' own sacrifice... for she gives her whole life, as well. An example of discipleship and obedience.

And so, I wonder- what needs to be pulled down in our lives? What in our churches, needs to fall down- what structures? What power structures, what buildings, what systems of government and rule need to change, in order for us to be as faithful as that widow? And how can we guard against building buildings and traditions and systems that are more about what we can achieve, than are about justice and feeding and care for those who are most in need?

What needs to go, in order to worship our Lord?

Unless the Lord builds the house, the Psalmist says, it is pointless- the people labor in vain.

Let us not labor in vain.