

1 Kings 17:8-16

17:8 Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying,

17:9 "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you."

17:10 So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.

17:11 As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand."

17:12 But she said, "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die."

17:13 Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son.

17:14 For thus says the LORD the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth."

17:15 She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days.

17:16 The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.

Mark 12:38-44

12:38 As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces,

12:39 and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets!

12:40 They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

12:41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums.

12:42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.

12:43 Then he 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.

12:44 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.

Proclaiming the Word

I like the movie *The Incredibles*. It's about a family of superheroes who try to save the world from destruction. In Bob Goff's book *Love Does*, he writes about the superhero dad in the movie. Mr. Incredible is an insurance claims adjuster, but he really wants to use his superhero powers. He begins

drawing pictures of the superhero suits he wants to wear. Of course, all the suits he draws include capes.

The dad has a friend named Edna who makes superhero suits and she keeps telling him that he needs to lose the cape. She mentions how capes cause big problems for super heroes. They get caught on things like fences or jet engines. Edna is famous for saying, "No capes!" You get a lot more stuff done if you lose the cape. Bob Goff thinks Jesus agrees.¹

Today's Scriptures are about generous widows who give their whole lives for others. Out of their poverty they give everything they have.

Isn't that convenient of the Lectionary to schedule this Scripture considering today is the day we dedicate our Stewardship Pledges for the coming year to God's work?

Today is traditionally called the Sermon on the Amount.

These Scriptures have been used to support giving all we have to God.

But what if I told you, it is not all about widows giving everything, all they have to live on, but about Christian disciples who must lose their capes? No capes!

Those capes in the case of the religious people of the Temple, are their having best seats, honor, and walking around in long robes, praying showy prayers. Jesus critiques and even brings judgment on the show without the action. Love does. In the following verses of Mark Chapter 13, the disciples are impressed by the large Temple and stones. Jesus says the Temple will be destroyed. And then only God will remain. The Temple, the people of God, and we the church exist to serve God. The religious folks have forgotten to serve God's mission, to be about the Kingdom of God. The church of Jesus does not have a mission. The Mission of God has a church. We must lose the capes that keep us from living that mission.

When I consider the widows, I imagine their generosity is a witness of their Trust in God. That is what impresses me most. When the prophet Elijah promises that God will not let the jar of meal give out or the oil fail, **the widow believed him.**

And when the widow gives her penny at the Temple, **she believes God will provide.** She has sung, "My Shepherd shall supply my need." She knows Psalm 23 by heart. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." That's provision- God's provision. She has heard the Law of God and knows that God's people are commanded to provide for the widow, orphans, and strangers in their communities. **She believes that God will provide, that God's people will care for her.** It is because of her trust that she can put in all that she has, her last penny. But the religious folks are not worthy of her gift are they?

Jesus condemns their show of piety, putting up appearances, while neglecting the needs of the poor and vulnerable. It would be as if we show up Sunday in our Sunday best and do religious things, go through the motions, without a heart for the gospel or a sincere desire to do God's will in the world.

Jesus reminds us to lose the cape, those things that hinder our witness to a benevolent God who commands us to care for the vulnerable poor. Lose the things that keep us from seeking first God's Kingdom and the care for all God's kids.

Our prayer of confession today puts it well,

Forgive us, Lord, when we think too highly of ourselves and clamor after privilege and honor.

That is pride. And the flip side of sin is to devalue ourselves and God. We confess:

Forgive us, Lord, when we cannot lift our gaze because we do not believe we have anything to give.

Lose the cape. For instance as a church, we might need to give up our idea that we need the biggest most beautiful buildings. Perhaps that's a cape we need to lose. Our facilities are here to serve God's mission. If they are not serving their purpose then we are just putting on a show. Let me use this moment to say thank you, because of your regular giving we have heat in the Club room, Tartan Hall, and offices. We just tied into that Commercial HVAC installed in our renovation. That is not a luxury, but a necessity for ministry to happen. The same goes for the Student Center. It is not a beautiful building, but it is adequate. And we will need to put a new roof on it soon. You have to do that every 55 years or so! But the point is not the building, it is the ministry done there. If our facilities exist so we can have a nice clubhouse for members rather than a place to show hospitality to strangers or to serve as a hospital for sinners, then we are in error. I want you to know our elders are faithful stewards of the gifts you give. We can trust them.

Last year I told you that I looked up the median income for Pickens County. Median Household income was just below \$44,000ⁱⁱ. But if each Fort Hill household tithed or gave 10% of that income, Fort Hill church would have a budget of \$1.7 million. The good news is that after paying our bills, we could give over half away- without fanfare or as a publicity stunt. That money could just to serve God's kingdom. Now as a family of four who has lived on that annual income, giving 10% was not an option. Some can give more than others.

Our Church's vision painted over the doors of those doors reads,

Joining together on a journey of Christian faith, we seek to be Disciples of Christ and to share God's love in our community and around the world.

We are the Body of Christ. I hope people see Jesus when they look at us, the church. The church exists to be a sign of the Kingdom of God in the world.

We believe God seeks the well-being of all God's children even at the risk of losing our lives. As we have been thanking God for those who encourage us in that great cloud of witness, we also are to be a collective witness as a church. Here is God's vision for the church.

PCUSA book of order, a part of our constitution reads:

“The church is called to be a sign in and for the world of the new reality of God... by healing and reconciling and binding up wounds...ministering to the needs of the poor, the sick, the lonely, and the powerless...engaging in the struggle to free people from sin, fear, oppression, hunger and injustice... giving itself and its substance to the service of those who suffer,...sharing with Christ in the establishing of his just, peaceable and loving rule in the world. The church is called to undertake this mission **even at the risk of losing its life.**” ⁱⁱⁱ

Bob Goff is right. Love does. Jesus never wore a cape. Jesus hardly ever talked to anyone about what he had done, the way he loved people. He just did it. And all that mattered to him was that God knew it. When we lose the cape, we don't get confused about what our purpose is, which is to love. We don't forget that it is God who gives us everything. All our energy is channeled into doing great things for God and loving the world like crazy even at the risk of losing our lives as Jesus did.

The gospel today is an indictment on people of faith and a call to examine ourselves in how we treat the poor. Jesus tells us how we spend our money reveals what we truly believe. The widows believed that they could trust God's provision above all else. It is their example we must follow because ultimately they show us something of Jesus. While we yet sinners, not worthy of his gift, Christ died for us, Christ rose for us, Christ prays for us. Christ gave his all for us. I hope when folks see this church, they don't marvel at the beautiful stones, but that they marvel at Jesus Christ.

James Haughey writes, “We read the Gospel as if we had no money, and we spend our money as if we know nothing of the Gospel.”^{iv} All that we do grows out of what we truly believe including how we use the money God has entrusted to us. So what do you believe? I took a stab at answering this question. I believe:

When I was lost and afraid, Christ came near to me. When I was in need, Christ gave his life for me. The Church and her disciples cared for me. As I make my way in this world, Christ remains faithful to me. And nothing, not even death can separate me from His love. And so in trust for God's faithful provision, I bring my best, my first fruits of all God has entrusted to my care as a token of my gratitude and a pledge- a pledge to use all God gives me to proclaim with my life and my lips that Jesus Christ loves this world. I believe I am called to seek first his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

How do you answer the question: What do you believe?

May our actions show what we believe. We can trust God for all our provisions.

ⁱ Reeb, Charley, *Lose the Cape*, Mark 12:28-34, 24th Sunday after Pentecost - Year B, November 04, 2018 at day1.org quoting Goff, Bob, *Love Does* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012).

ⁱⁱ based on the 2017 Census at www.census.gov/quickfacts/pickenscountysouthcarolina. Median household income \$43,561 rounded up to \$44,000 multiplied by 389 potential households, the number of family units in our congregation. <https://church-trends.pcusa.org/church/22372/financials/>

ⁱⁱⁱ PCUSA Book of Order G-3.0200-3.0400.

^{iv} John Haughey, Wealth issue of the *Living Pulpit*, April-June 2003, p. 14.