

Consecration Sunday
23rd Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 27B
Lutheran
I Kings 17:8-16
Psalm 146
Hebrews 9:24-28
Mark 12:38-44

Melinda J. Wagner
First Immanuel

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Today's scriptures invite us to reflect on two ordinary women who responded to God in extraordinary ways.

The first is the widow of Zarephath. The prophet Elijah met her during a desperate time, when a drought had stretched on. She was out of food and preparing to cook one last meal for herself and her young son. Elijah made an impossible request. He asked her to share her last cake of bread with him. And, unbelievably, impossibly, she did it. Because her values were such that she wouldn't consider not sharing with someone in need. And she believed Elijah's promise that God would provide.

The second widow appeared in the fine temple in Jerusalem, on a bustling day when people were parading through the marble chambers to make their offerings. It wasn't done discreetly. People brought big sacks of money, eager for their gifts to be admired. But Jesus' attention was drawn to an extremely poor widow who put in only two coins. Jesus saw that she put in "everything she had, all she had to live on." The Greek says she gave away "her whole living"—literally, she gave "her whole life."

These stories are simple, but they leave us astonished. Astonished at the strong faith of these humble women. How God's word opened up generosity in them and gave them the trust and faith to share, even when their lives were not secure. How they reflected the same spirit that Christ himself showed, giving his whole self, his whole life away.

It occurs to me that these simple, everyday stories have a lot to say about our own everyday way of life. Both stories have to do with the way God sustained these women from day to day. And even more, how they expressed their faith day to day. They speak to us about generosity and sharing. They speak to us about letting go and trusting God. And giving out of one's own humble means.

We do have giving on our minds this morning, this Consecration Sunday. And in preparation for this day, perhaps you have been reflecting as I have on what it means to give out of what we have been given.

I'd like to share with you something about why I give, why we as a family make it a priority to share of our resources through the church, for the sake of God's world.

I do this with a little trepidation, because as a friend said recently, it's easier to talk about almost anything, maybe even sex, than it is to talk about money. Our culture places a kind of taboo on money talk, especially when you're talking about your own budget or your own decisions concerning money. That's private stuff.

But I'm going to risk crossing over that taboo line, knowing that my story is not everybody's story, but trusting that there are common threads. And believing that for as often as we discuss Christian attitudes and actions, we don't talk nearly enough about Christian finances, as one person of faith to another. We can all learn by opening up that conversation.

I grew up in a home where money wasn't really talked about, I think probably because it was seen as something for adults to worry about, not children. There was a general silence around money. So when I became an adult, it was exciting for me to get acquainted with the world of money and begin making my own money decisions.

I discovered early on that one of my particular joys was being able to give money away. Giving is a genuine pleasure for me. I can't explain it. It just gives me a sense of lightness and happiness and freedom. It is spiritually rewarding to be able to let go and share. So generosity has become a core value in my life. It's an essential part of who I am, and who I want to be.

I began tithing to the church before the time I met Aaron, and fortunately we were of the same mind, so as a married couple we have always given about 10% of our income away. Practically all of that goes to our local congregation, First Immanuel. A smaller amount goes to our seminaries, world hunger, and some advocacy causes. Some years it has been relatively easy to give away 10% of what we make, other years it has really been a stretch, but we've stuck with it.

10% is a big chunk of our family budget. And that's one reason why we do give that much. Because it's important to me that since my faith is such an important part of my life, it should be reflected significantly in my spending habits. Someone challenged me long ago to carefully review my checkbook and credit card statements and evaluate whether my day to day spending reflects my true life priorities. For me, faith is not a small thing, it's a huge central value. So it's right for that priority to show up in our spending.

I also believe in what some people call "first fruits giving." So when I get a paycheck, I make it a practice to write the checks for our offering first, then pin them to the bulletin board to bring to church week by week. It's a habit that helps me keep first things first.

Why do we give 10%? To be honest, we do it because it's mentioned in the Bible. In the Old Testament, God's people are to set aside the first tenth of their harvest for God's work, as what is called a *tithe*. I'm not a legalistic person at all, but this traditional amount has usually been both a sensible and a challenging level for our family. When we budget, we just operate on the basis that the first one-tenth of our money belongs to God, not to us.

Our giving doesn't have to be 10%. It can be more or less. What matters is that our giving is a portion of our income set aside intentionally for God's work. There are people for whom 10% is too small an amount to give. They have more and they can give more. Other people will give less, percentage-wise. If you're worrying about buying groceries or paying rent, then that's money you need for your livelihood. The specific amount is a choice each of us is free to make. I have found that it's a valuable exercise to do the calculations so we're aware of what percentage of our income we give. It puts things in perspective and gives us a place to begin from, and a place to grow from.

Why do I give? Not just because I want to, but because I need to. Giving in a substantial way reminds me of where my priorities are. It loosens my grip on what I imagine to be mine. And it reminds me that all of this – all this world, everything in it, including the objects in my home and the money in my bank account, all of this belongs to God.

Giving for me is a spiritual stance, even a spiritual discipline. It's a way of saying no to the world's values, to materialism and greed and selfishness and measuring people by their bank accounts. It's a way of saying yes to God's presence and God's claim on me and all things. It's a way of recognizing that God is the maker and owner of everything that is. It's a way of practicing dependence on God, and living out my trust in God. In some small way like the widows whose stories we've heard.

I can't say I'm free from money worries – in fact, money has often been one of those anxiety trigger points for me. But I find that my money worries usually focus on the future, not the present. It's always, what about tomorrow? What about ten years from now? My basic needs are met for today, and that's more than many, many people in our world can say.

Making the intentional decision to give, in the midst of a culture that's obsessed with money, and often anxious about it, is a way of expressing the deep truth that my security isn't found in a bank account. My security has its home in God. As people who have been claimed and saved by Jesus Christ, my family and I operate by different rules. We don't operate out of a mindset of scarcity or fear, but out of God's greater reality of abundance.

This is something I think those two widows knew. That although the world is often driven by the fear that there will never be enough to go around -- not enough money, not enough food, not enough love – our God is a God of abundance. God's reign opens things up wide, with love enough to cross all barriers, forgiveness enough to cover every sin, and generosity enough to satisfy the hungers of every body, mind, and spirit. God's abundance overshadows our anxiety and invites us to live in a way that is open, trusting, and forever sharing, knowing that in Christ there is truly no lack of anything.

Living out of God's abundance is a stance of faith. It's the way I consciously choose to live my life. And although my generosity doesn't come close to matching that of those humble and amazing women in scripture, I want their spirit, Christ's spirit, to live in me.

I give to church because I love the church and I believe in it. Because I would never want to imagine a world without God's church as a living, vital presence. I value what happens when God's people gather, and hearts are inspired and wounds are healed, and sins are forgiven, and new life is opened up before all of us who need to begin again in God's love. I value the way our particular congregation serves people in need and shares Jesus Christ with our neighborhood and with all the people who are touched by those who go out from worship here to serve in all kinds of ways, every day.

I love the church, and yet I don't really give to the church. I give through the church to support God's mission in the world, which I believe is being lived out faithfully and creatively here. I give because I need to be invested in what God is making of us, what God is growing in us, in this community of disciples that stands for all to see as a sign that God is real, alive, and active in this world.

And I give because I love God, who made me God's own. I love God, who gave God-self completely for us. God bless each one of us to give our whole lives, all that we are, in thankful love. Amen.