

## ACCUMULATED PROPHETS

Mark 12:41 – 13:2    Philippians 4:10-20

November 15, 2009    J. S. O'Neill

**Mark 12:41 - 13:2** <sup>41</sup> He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. <sup>42</sup> A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. <sup>43</sup> 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. <sup>44</sup> 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."

**13:1** As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" <sup>2</sup> Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down

**Philippians 4:10-20** <sup>10</sup> I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. <sup>11</sup> Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. <sup>12</sup> I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. <sup>13</sup> I can do all things through him who strengthens me. <sup>14</sup> In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress. <sup>15</sup> You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. <sup>16</sup> For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. <sup>17</sup> Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. <sup>18</sup> I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have

*received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. <sup>19</sup> And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. <sup>20</sup> To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.*

One of those newspaper space-filler squibs caught my eye the other day. According to the San Francisco Chronicle, a city library amnesty program netted a record 29,228 returned books, periodicals, and electronic media worth \$55,165 in fines. As long as the returners had an excuse – any excuse – the fines were waived. My favorite was a woman who returned a diet and exercise book which she said was defective because she failed to lose any weight.

Well, the story inspired me to browse my bookshelves and I discovered that several of my books are missing, too. I know where most of them are, but others are in the “vanished into thin air” category, and I suspect that no amnesty program would likely turn them up. On the other hand, I found some illegitimate volumes in my collection. Not that they weren't good books. It's just that they weren't mine. I had borrowed them long ago from someone and had simply never returned them.

I apparently stand in a long tradition of folio felons. Our race has been around ever since books were invented, and unlike the San Francisco library folks, people really get steamed about it. I once browsed (but did not permanently borrow) a volume entitled *A Small Book of Book Curses*, a volume of invective railing against book bandits and casting them (as the Bible might have it) into the outer darkness. You think borrowing a book and not returning it is a relatively minor infraction? Listen to this little love note from the Monastery of San Pedro in Barcelona:

*For him that steals or borrows and returns not this book from its owner, let it change into a serpent in his hand and rend him. Let him be struck with palsy and all his members be*

*blasted. Let him languish in pain crying aloud for mercy, and let there be no surcease to his agony till he sink into dissolution. Let bookworms gnaw his entrails in token of the Worm that never dies, and when at last he goes to his final punishment, let the flames of Hell consume him forever.*

My advice? Stick with the San Francisco library and never try to borrow a book from a Barcelonan monk.

But, I cry "Mea culpa!" I deserve everything the curse imposes, for I have borrowed and not returned, I have used and not repaid, I have taken and not given back. And much more than in regard to a few books. It is true of every life: we drink from wells we did not dig, and we build on foundations we did not lay. A corollary of these insights looks to the future: we own nothing; we only borrow what we have from those who come after us. We live in a web of relationship with others, living on bequests from those who have lived before us and using that which will furnish the rooms of the future. And it is when we don't recognize and respect that reality that we become ingrown, selfish, and peevish, acting as though the only generation that matters is ours, the only time worth living is now, and the only responsibilities we bear are to ourselves.

In fact, we are forever only inheritors and borrowers, stewards of riches we did not create, drinking from wells we did not dig, building upon foundations we did not lay. We are under obligation, therefore, to live in such a way that this web of relationship which has sustained us will remain intact when our lives are through, so that others can drink and build and pass on the bequest to others.

Surely the key word in reflecting on all this is *gratitude*. Something of that sort of spirit must have been active in those people who were contributing to the Temple treasury that day. There are many other words we could use to characterize the diverse relationships we have with persons or institutions which we support. There is *duty* and *obligation* which draw from us a measured and sometimes grudging response to claims upon us.

There is *bargaining* whereby we try to bribe our consciences and allay feelings of guilt, a process that engages the heart in a calculating way. And, there is, of course, the basic *consumerist* approach where one's relationship to others is defined in terms of purchases of products and fees for services.

None of these ways of thinking about money comes anywhere close to what was going on in the story of the widow contributing her penny at the temple's poor box. Almsgiving was the safety-net system of the day, and there was a regular flow of coins rattling into the treasury. A rich person's offerings would make a sound like hailstones on a tin roof, a noise that rose above the hubbub in the courtyard. I remember throwing a handful of pennies, nickels, and dimes into a Salvation Army Christmas kettle last year. The mass totaled well less than a dollar, I'm sure, but it sounded like ten. "What a generous guy," I imagined other Christmas shoppers saying to themselves about my noisy largesse. "What a phony!" I said to myself, though smugly satisfied.

As is usually the case with parables and Bible stories, we know almost nothing about this anonymous woman, except that Jesus called her a "poor widow," a redundancy if I ever heard one. We can assume the economic worst about a husbandless woman in that day. There was no provision for widows to inherit property. Her future depended upon being taken into the home of a son or a brother-in-law, if they could afford it. It is not accidental, perhaps, that the Hebrew word for "widow" and the word meaning "to be mute" are very similar.

Jesus, fully aware of her need and her poverty, points this woman out and makes obvious the spiritual truth that we haven't really given much until we have given sacrificially. At no point does Jesus disparage the gifts of the wealthy. He merely points out the profound difference between giving a little out of abundance and giving much out of nothing. Halford Luccock observed, "The gift which counts is the gift which costs.... True giving is to be measured relative to what is left."

How do we measure it? The church is one among many

institutions in our society which depends upon the generosity of persons who care for it to support it, but in general that's where the similarity between the church and other institutions ends. Other institutions do not challenge you to consider your life as a gift from God, nor do they to strive to expand your spiritual imagination to eternal dimensions, nor do they provide a community of care and nurture and hope that stands with you in need, anxiety, and trial. Despite these differences, we are tempted to deal with the church as though it is just another institution among many which needs our support. The church, then, has similar status with the United Way or our favorite college's alumni fund, or – worse – it becomes another in an array of services where we pay for what we think we're getting out of it.

Instead, the church is an institution of gratitude; it is a monument to sacrifice and generosity. It is a community that survives by virtue of the sacrifice of Jesus. It knows that it is in giving that we are saved from selfishness, in generosity that we are liberated from pride, and in participating in God's generosity that we are continuing in hope. The church knows that giving creates health in the soul, that sharing is spiritually cleansing, and that to whom much more has been given much more is expected.

The church is at least one among few institutions in our society with which we do not have a consumerist relationship, thank God. It is one place where we do not have to pay to belong. You are not valued according to your net worth. You do not gain status by virtue of what your own, where you live, for whom you work, or from which family you come. Indeed, each of us here is in a debt relationship to God which we could never repay. Everything we have is gift. None of us earned our way in to life, nor will we pay to leave it. It's all here for us to enjoy, to have, to use.

We *belong* to a church; but there is no sense in which we belong to a department store or philanthropy or service agency. We are *called* by God into service, but we are *enticed* by commercial entities to buy services and products. We are defined by our church by the Lord of Life as *brothers* and *sisters*, while

everywhere else we are known as *clients* or *customers*. So, let's challenge the assumption that the church should not be the first and chief recipient of our offerings. There is no other institution in our society that you can count on for sure to endure beyond your life, no other institution that is more capable of extending and magnifying your love and service across the world than the church.

There is no other institution that addresses you so close to the very core of your being than the church, and no other place that cares so profoundly for your soul and the souls of your children. You can't put a monetary value on that, it is true, but neither can you avoid trying.

The average Christian today, even in this economic downturn, is 200% richer in real economic power than was the typical giver to churches during the Great Depression, but the rate of giving has dropped. It would be easy to spin out speculations as to why this is, about social pressures increasingly isolating us from one another, about costs of living scales, changing lifestyles, the increasing costs of necessities, and the vastly different values we now apply to life.

But, of course, it is still the people who make up a society and we are the ones who act out these values. If we're isolated from one another, it is our fault, and who is going to fix it, and what institutions are poised with insights, energies, and creative solutions to do so? Who else: it is you and I, it is the church, it is this process called faith, and the only essential challenge worth responding to in these regards is Jesus' teaching, "Where your treasure is, there will be your heart also." We have drunk from wells we did not dig, and have built upon foundations we did not lay. Where are we digging, where are we building today that those who follow have something to start with?

The title of this sermon is a lame pun, but it carries a true double thrust. The church is the gathering of the saints, the cloud of witnesses, the fellowship of the faithful. We are an accumulation of prophetic voices called to address the world with a saving word and a vigorous service in Christ's name. We do that only when our

total energies are collected and focused. If our wealth is not employed, our hearts won't be in the task. If the prophetic voice is not linked with all our power, including financial generosity, our words and work will profit nothing.

One of my favorite cartoons shows a couple and their baby being greeted by the minister after church. The baby and the father are both bawling. The mother apologizes for all the sobbing noises during worship: "The baby's teething," she explains, and jerking her thumb at her husband, says, "And he's tithing."

The shelves of my life are full of borrowings and thefts, unreturned, unacknowledged, unappreciated. I have taken for myself what I needed and acted as though that is my due. I have borrowed and not returned, I have used and not repaid, I have taken and not given back. I have received abundantly of the gifts and blessings of God and have not shown sufficient gratitude. That's worthy of tears if we have heard the grandest call and have responded with a less-than-grand answer.