

the Rev. Dr. Paul Tellström
Stewardship Sunday,

“Sermon on the Amount”

Irvine United Congregational Church, UCC
November 8, 2009

Gospel Reading: Mark 12:38-44

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Writing in the latest issue of *Christian Century*, the powerful young preacher, Otis Moss III of Trinity UCC in Chicago, asks this question from the old spiritual: “Have you got good religion?”

“Enslaved Africans in the antebellum South asked this question when they sang a spiritual that offers a poignant and penetrating perspective on the state of Western Christianity. The famous line from ‘Have You Got Good Religion?’ is a critique of Americanized Christianity. ‘Good Religion,’ or religion rooted in love, justice, hope, forgiveness and grace, is the core of the narrative that enslaved Africans believed to be at the heart of the gospel. But the world of the antebellum South painted a different picture for these people. Bad religion was the mantra of the day. America witnessed religion heavy in ritual and doctrine but anemic in living out love, justice and forgiveness. The narrative of liberation clearly demonstrated and preached in the gospel was nowhere to be found.”¹

These people saw their pious masters dressed in ecclesiastical garb or their finest Sunday clothing, entering into a church to pray as those who believed God had entitled them to the very best, and re-emerging as people who felt they had the right to rule over the lives of those who had no rights at all. The old spiritual, “Have You Got Good Religion?” was a critique, warning the community not to become like those “Southern antebellum scribes” whose ostentatious displays of religion flew in the face of how they practiced their faith as slave owners.

It was this same kind of atmosphere that Jesus found himself commenting upon in the story of the widow’s mite. A group of people who found themselves enriched by a system that benefited some at the expense of the many, came to influence the religious structure that should have stood up for those without justice.

Prior to this, Jesus drove the moneychangers from the temple. Later, he addressed some Pharisees who asked him if it was lawful to pay taxes to the emperor. Knowing that they would carry Roman currency instead of their own coin, he requested a denarius. “Whose head is on this coin?” he asked. “Caesar’s,” they said. Jesus said to them, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Jesus is critiquing the entire religious system—he is separating the things of the empire from the realm of God. And now, he is sitting near the temple treasury, watching as people bring their offerings. A slot in the wall that allows coins to drop into a metal box provides the opportunity to make a significant noise as people brought their offerings to the temple. It was easy to let others know how much support you actually gave, and as Jesus sat there, he saw how people made significant donations.

As he taught, while hearing the sounds of the coin of the empire being dropped in the box, he 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! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

Nearby was a poor widow. The story says that she “came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 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. 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.”

This is supposed to be one of those golden illustrations for a Stewardship sermon. The chance collision of the story of the widow’s mite with Stewardship is no doubt seen as a gift from God to many pastors facing today. The goal of such a sermon is likely to inspire giving in the manner that the widow gave—not simply to give a little cut off the top to God (read: church) but to dig deep and give freely all that one has.

But I think this goes against the grain of how Mark intended this story to be heard. In denouncing the scribes, Jesus says they “devour widow’s houses.” Thus when Jesus comments that the widow “out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on” he is less praising the widow and more condemning a religious institution that would take a poor widow’s last penny. Perhaps what Jesus is pointing to in this passage is not unlike those slaves singing words to a spiritual in the antebellum South: “Have You Got Good Religion?”

So, here’s a question: have we got “good religion” in America?

Christianity was born as a small, minority voice, which, at great sacrifice to its adherents, stood in opposition to the values of the empire. Today, it is a majority voice that is in bed with the empire, finding ways to make sacred the prejudices and injustices of the dominant voice.

† A Pew Forum on Religion poll² found that a good majority of American Christians believe that torture can be justified. The percentage of those believing in torture increases with greater church attendance.

† A prosperity gospel crept into our religious vocabulary, reflecting a market-driven theology whereby we are blessed by being consumers, not citizens, in a culture that considers us termites; ever consuming and looking for more.

† There is a streak of anti-intellectualism in churches that cause them to become determined to shield their children from learning any of the sciences that appear to be in conflict with a cardboard theology.

† Fresh from their victory in Maine, members of the religious right are turning to the next battle to remove rights from gay and lesbian people. It is not about protecting the sacred institution of marriage (which should be a civil contract anyway). We are witnessing a witch hunt calling itself “Christian,” whose only purpose is to dehumanize a small minority of Americans.

† Finally, Jesus disciples were men. They lived at a time when women had no rights or protections, which is why the widow who gave her last coins had such little to give. We now live in a time and place when the rights of all people are slowly being lifted up. Women have greater access to opportunity now than ever before; with much more work still to be done. But in many churches, women cannot serve as clergy, for the stated reason that two-thousand years ago, Jesus’ disciples were men, because their cultural system lifted up men. They were also Jewish, which by this logic, should throw the rest of us out as well.

Tell me, have we got “Good Religion”?

This is why I belong to the United Church of Christ. It is a church that cherishes intellectual freedom over doctrine, it is a church that focuses on justice at the same time it lifts up a sense of community; all based on an understanding of the teachings of Jesus, the love of God and love of neighbor as oneself. It is a church of “firsts.” The first church to ordain an African-American, the first to ordain a woman, the first to ordain a gay man. We were the church of the abolitionists, and it was one of our churches that hid the liberty bell from the British under the

floorboards of its sanctuary, so that bell could once again ring out “liberty”—full, true, vibrant, all-inclusive liberty for all, not some, of its citizens.

This is the church that is represented in this community. We have “good bones.” This church community, functioning against the grain of the culture around us, is now poised to move to a new level in order to do some remarkable things together.

Next week, I hope you will come to welcome our candidate for associate pastor and see a one man show of Clarence Jordan and Bishop Oscar Romero, as portrayed by Al Staggs.

Clarence Jordan grew up in Georgia, and observed the deep prejudices of the people around him, at the same time he embraced the Christian faith. He noticed that what the Gospel talked about and how the religion was practiced, were two different things.

Along with some others, he formed Koinonia in 1942. This was a Christian community sharing life and following the example of the first Christian communities, even amidst the poverty and racism of the rural South. With other pastors, black and white, they preached, taught and lived together so that they could envision an interracial community where blacks and whites could live and work together in a spirit of partnership.

Based on this radical call to discipleship, Koinonia’s very presence confronted racism, militarism and materialism with its commitment to:

Treat all human beings with dignity and justice

Choose love over violence.

Live simply.

Be stewards of the land and its natural resources.

Soon other families joined them, and visitors came to “serve a period of apprenticeship in developing community life on the teachings and principles of Jesus.” When resources allowed the hiring of seasonal help, black and white workers were paid equally. When the community and its guests, neighbors and friends gathered for a meal, everyone was invited to sit at the table together regardless of color.

They withstood firebombs, bullets, KKK rallies, death threats, property damage, excommunication from churches, and economic boycotts. Koinonia and its members suffered at times, but being on the side of justice, they prevailed.

Then, with the new energy of Millard and Linda Fuller, the Jordans and Koinonia moved in a new direction. Today, Habitat for Humanity continues to restore dilapidated housing and build new, with partners from all over the spectrum. No, or low-interest, loans are made available and people who otherwise might not be able to live with dignity have housing in which to raise their families. IUCC participated in Habitat, and I hope we do again soon.

All of this came from a community that dreamed and acted upon a better way of living out a Christian witness in their part of the country. Because of them, tens of thousands of homes are occupied by families. Because Clarence Jordan bucked the pious religionists all around him, his corner of Georgia began the process of integration and healing earlier than others. When Jordan died while writing his sermon, forty years ago last week, the coroner refused to come to his home to pronounce him dead. Jordan was guilty of practicing, “Good Religion,” which is religion rooted in love, justice, hope, forgiveness and grace. Whereas, the faith community around him reflected the values of the empire, instead of the empire reflecting the values of the faith community.

This brings us to this Stewardship moment for 2009.

It also brings us to the brink of a new time for our church—a time when we will be able to reach out to more people and be more of an influence for good in our community. We can continue to be that “Koinonia Community,” where all have an equal place at the table, recognizing that some of us would not be welcome in another community. We can be a place where kids can be raised to believe that God is love, to accept each other, and learn how to speak up against prejudice and injustice, rather than accepting the status-quo. We can continue to be a theologically progressive church where you don’t have to check your brain at the door, and where everyone is encouraged to come to their own understanding of faith.

Church writer David Ray says, “Most churches think the biggest issue is fiscal—how to buy and pay for what they think they need. But the major issue is and always will be theological—how to be the kind of church God is calling us to be. The *sub-plot* is how to pay for it. But any church that knows who it is, and why it exists will figure out HOW to be what it wants to be.”³

We know who we are. We know that in the chill of theological certainty and among deep cultural prejudices, we are the church that promises to extend Jesus’ radical welcome to anyone, whoever they are, and wherever they are on their faith journey. We know that we look primarily at the gospel to the example of Jesus, and try to be every possibility we can be of that example’s expression.

We know who we are, and it is time to fulfill our promise.

There will now be more opportunities to learn, worship, fellowship, and pursue justice. There will especially be more opportunities for young families, young adults and kids. If you fall into that category, please stick with us and help us to build and grow in this particular area so that there is a thriving Progressive Christian community for our younger friends and families, and an alternative to the religion of the empire. Let this be a place you would be proud to invite friends to join.

Several years ago, you communicated a direction, and the goal in this direction is now clearly on our doorstep, but it is not free. It has been a rough year for some people right here in our community. Your church needs more money to achieve the goals we have laid out for this year, but the church should never be a financial hardship on anyone when there are others who can give more, or give for the first time. It has not been an easy year for my family as well, but this is the kind of church to which I want to continue to pledge my support.

Let’s not be anemic in living out a faith of love, justice and forgiveness. Like Clarence Jordan, let’s be guilty of practicing, “Good Religion,” which is religion rooted in love, justice, hope, forgiveness and grace. This is what is at the core of the narrative we believe to be at the heart of the gospel.

If you believe that together we can make this happen, let the whole church say, “Amen.”

Elizabeth Griswold

I want to acknowledge the presence with us this morning of Elizabeth Griswold, here today simply to worship. You may greet her after the service, if you like; but we have planned more focused opportunities for you to say hello and perhaps to have a word with her, at the end of this week, as we have announced. Elizabeth, *we are pleased to see you today.*

Sermon Resources

1. Otis Moss III, in “Living the Word,” Christian Century, November 3, 2009, p. 20
2. <http://www.usnews.com/blogs/god-and-country/2009/04/30/poll-most-evangelicals-and-catholics-condone-torture-in-some-instances.html>
3. David Ray, “Big Small Church Book,” Pilgrim Press/United Church Press, Cleveland, (October 1992)

Scripture for Sunday, November 8, 2009

Mark 12:38-44

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, **39** and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! **40** They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." **41** He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. **42** A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. **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. **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."