

4-Week Sermon Series, part 2: Generous Living

Scripture reading: Mark 12:38-44. Pastor Hubert Den Draak, July 20, '14.

Week 2: "Life is for Giving" - an Aggadah

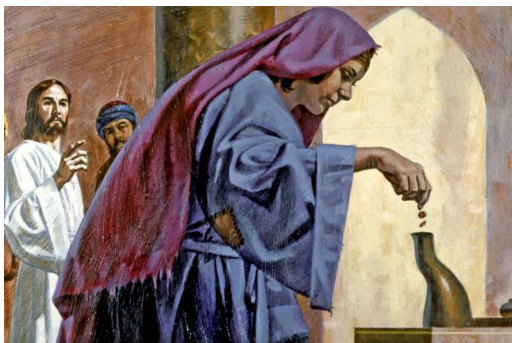
You may have heard of the Broadway musical and the movie *Les Misérables*, based on Victor Hugo's great novel of the same title. There's a scene in it that takes place between the poor Valjean, a kind priest, and a stern magistrate. Valjean is befriended by the priest who offers him a room in his home to spend the night. Later Valjean steals the priest's silver candlesticks. The priest reports the theft; a magistrate is brought in and questions Valjean in the priest's presence. As the scene unfolds, Valjean appears headed straight for jail. Surprisingly, the priest retracts his charges and offers the magistrate an excuse for the missing candlesticks.



Of course Valjean is stunned. When he and the bishop are alone, he asks, "Why did you do that? You know I am guilty." To which the priest replies, "Life is for giving."

Think about that: "Life is for giving"... What a great definition of "generous living". And how entirely the opposite of what society tells us. "Life is for *taking*" is the message we hear every day. If we are to believe what the media tell us, life is about taking what you're entitled to, now.

For God, it's the opposite, as Valjean found out. He wasn't punished for stealing the silver candlesticks. The priest forgave him, and was willing not only to take the loss of two valuable objects, but also to make a fool of himself in front of the magistrate. But he didn't mind. Because he trusted that this second chance would be a transformative experience for Valjean. *That* is what counted - not the loss of two valuable objects or the magistrate's scorn.



In our Bible story we just heard this morning something similar happens, with even more dramatic consequences. Jesus witnesses how a poor widow gives her last two coins to temple, leaving her penniless. Now many of us will think of the widow in this story as a model of faithful stewardship, to always give what you can. But there is a problem with that idea.

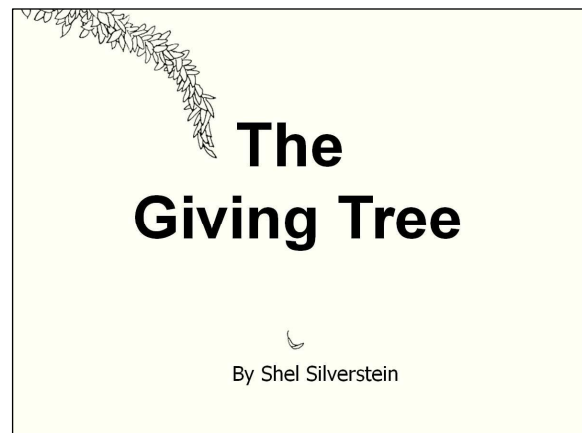
Jesus calls his disciples to notice that the widow gives all that she has; or as it says literally, "the whole of her life". She gives her whole life - not to God, but to the temple, in Jesus' eyes a corrupt institution ran by corrupt priests and self-important scribes, whom he sharply condemns just before the poor widow enters the scene. She shouldn't be giving money to the temple - the temple should give money to *her*! And right *after* the widow's story, Jesus tells his disciples that the glorious temple where all this is taking place will soon be destroyed to the very last stone, the result of its own corruption. Well, that puts the story in a different light, doesn't it?

This is also the last story of Jesus' public ministry in Mark's gospel. What follows after this is Jesus foretelling the destruction of the temple, after which we go into the passion story. In other words, the widow in this story offers us a glimpse into what Jesus is about. Jesus implies here that he is like that widow, about to "give the whole of *his* life" for something corrupt, namely all of humanity - us, so that we may live. And after Jesus' death, his disciples followed his example, also living selfless lives so that others might live: the poor, the oppressed, the sick, the outcast, and yes, the widows.

They did it to make God's kingdom a bit more of a reality, one selfless act of giving at a time. After all, "Life is for giving", as the priest said to Valjean. And both "giving" and "forgiving" cost us. They take courage and trust. Courage to go against what society tells us we should do. And the trust that it will work out, although usually in different ways from what we expected. But it will work out - if we do it in Christ's name.

As Christians we are called to "live generously". And as Jesus showed us today, that involves a lot more than we may have thought at first. So here is a story to help explain what it means. The story is told in a old Jewish tradition called the Aggadah. An Aggadah story takes a difficult teaching from the Scriptures and retells it in a more accessible format, like a modern-day parable.

This story is called *The Giving Tree*, by Shel Silverstein. And it goes like this:



Animated story of *The Giving Tree*

Once there was a tree...
and she loved a little boy.

And every day the boy would come
and he would gather her leaves
And make them into crowns and play king of the forest .

He would climb up her trunk
and swing from her branches
and eat apples.

And they would play hide and go seek.

And when he was tired, he would sleep in her shade.

And the boy loved the tree...
very much... And the tree was happy.

But time went by.
And the boy grew older.
And the tree was often alone.

Then one day the boy came to the tree and the tree said: "Come, Boy, come and climb up my trunk and swing from my branches and eat apples and play in my shade and be happy."

"I am too big to climb and play," said the boy. "I want to buy things and have fun. I want some money. Can you give me some money?"

"I'm sorry," said the tree, "but I have no money. I have only leaves and apples. Take my apples, Boy, and sell them in the city. Then you will have money and you will be happy."

And so the boy climbed up the tree and gathered her apples and carried them away.
And the tree was happy...

But the boy stayed away for long time.... and the tree was sad. And then one day the boy came back and the tree shock with joy and she said, "Come, Boy, climb up my trunk and swing from my branches and be happy."

"I am too busy to climb trees," said the boy. "I want a house to keep me warm," he said. "I want a wife and I want children, and so I need a house. Can you give me a house?"

"I have no house," said the tree. "The forest is my house, but you may cut off my branches and build a house. Then you will be happy."

And so the boy cut off her branches and carried them away to build his house.
And the tree was happy...

But the boy stayed away for a long time. And when he came back, the tree was so happy she could hardly speak. "Come, Boy," she whispered, "come and play."

"I am too old and sad to play," said the boy. "I want a boat that will take me far away from here. Can you give me a boat?"

"Cut down my trunk and make a boat," said the tree. "Then you can sail away... and be happy."

And so the boy cut down her trunk and made a boat and sailed away.
And the tree was happy... but not really.

And after a long time the boy came back again.

"I am sorry, Boy," said the tree, "but I have nothing left to give you, my apples are gone."

"My teeth are too weak for apples," said the boy.

"My branches are gone," said the tree. "You cannot swing on them"

"I am too old to swing on branches," said the boy.

"My trunk is gone," said the tree. "You cannot climb"

"I am too tired to climb," said the boy.

"I am sorry," sighed the tree. "I wish that I could give you something... But have nothing left. I am just an old stump. I am sorry..."

"I don't need very much now," said the boy, "just a quiet place to sit and rest. I am very tired."

"Well," said the tree, straightening herself up as well as she could, "well, an old stump is good for sitting and resting. Come, Boy, sit down. Sit down and rest." And the boy did.

And the tree was happy...



The End