

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, November 8, 2009
Rev. John Tapscott

"ENOUGH"

1 Kings 17:15,16

A father took his three daughters to church and gave them each two quarters for the offering. When the offering plate came around the two older girls put their money in the plate, but the youngest girl held on to hers. On the way out of church the little girl pulled the minister down to her level and said, "Today my sisters put their quarters in the offering plate, but I want to give them to you myself." When the minister asked why, she said, "I want to help you, because my daddy says you're the POOREST preacher we've ever had."

Now most preachers feel inadequate when it comes to speaking about money and giving. We know it is a sensitive issue. But money and faith are tied together. How we give and what we give says much about our relationship with God and the place He has in our lives. Jesus knew all about money and our need for it. In fact, there are hints inside the Bible and outside that before Jesus undertook his ministry he was not poor, but made a decent living as a carpenter. The Nazareth carpenter shop run by Joseph and Jesus was the "go-to" place in Galilee for oxen yoke. I think Jesus' main concern was that money can easily become top priority in our lives, our god, the idol we bow down to. So he had much to say about it. One scholar claims that a third of Jesus' teaching has to do with money. In fact, Jesus endorsed the teaching of our Old Testament lesson for today. It's this: When you give first fruits to God, God will make sure you have enough for your needs. God makes sure you have enough.

Now this ancient story from 1 Kings 17 took place at least 800 years before the days of Jesus. In those days, wealth was not measured by money. It was counted by the land you controlled, the number of sheep you owned, the amount of grain you had. And this year the rains had not come. The crops had been poor. And during those difficult days, God sent the prophet Elijah to Zarephath. God told him, "I have commanded a widow there to feed you." So Elijah went, saw the widow, asked her for water, and then for a morsel of bread. She said, "But I don't have anything baked, and all I have is a handful of meal in a jar and a little oil in a jug. Right now I'm gathering a few sticks for a fire. I'm going to bake some bread for myself and my son. But this is our last meal. After that we're going to die." Elijah said, "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, then make something for yourself and your son." Now I want to underline some key words in verse 13. Under the circumstances it's a stunning request, really. Elijah said, "Do not be afraid, go and do as you have said, but first make a little cake and bring it to me." "First make a cake and bring it to me."

These words contain a bed-rock Biblical principle for giving by God's people. Give the

first fruits, the first portion to God. In this case, the cake the woman was asked to give to the man of God was essentially giving to God. And it was to be first. The Biblical model, the Biblical principle, for God's people is first fruits giving. We might call it giving off-the top. The Bible says, "honour the Lord with your wealth as the first charge on all your earnings...honour the Lord with the first fruits." Jesus said, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God." Now we're not talking amount of giving here, but the priority of giving. The first charge on your earnings is for God's work. When you cash your cheque and bring money home, the first portion goes into the offering envelope. Or the first cheque you write each month is for the work of the church. And if you are on PAR, you are already doing that in a way. It may not be the first thing out of your account. But it's there and you don't touch it, because you know it will be withdrawn on the 20th of the month.

Now this is new teaching for some of us, or at least a new practice. Often we give out of what's left over after we've met our other obligations. We may even give to God things on which the expiry date has run out. God was displeased when the Hebrews brought in weak or wounded sheep for sacrifice, when they gave left-overs rather than first fruits. But he was honoured when they brought their best. God asks for the first fruits. And why not? The reason you have life and breath and Christ and faith and hope and love and salvation and everything else is because God gave them to you first. You honour God when you make giving to God the first charge on your earnings.

Again, don't confuse giving first fruits with the amount you give, although first fruits giving tends to be more generous than giving out of what's left over. First-fruits giving means giving to God first. It is a Biblical practice, even for the poor widow in Zarephath. Elijah said, "First, make me a little cake...."

Now I know what you're thinking. I can hear your objection. "If I give first-fruits to God, I may not have enough left to meet my needs. So I pay my other bills first then give to God out of what's left." Such thinking is understandable. Jobs are uncertain. Investments are down. We wonder if we'll have enough. In fact, that was what the widow of Zarephath said. "I don't have enough to do what you ask, Elijah. I only have enough to make a final meal." None of us are in her dire straits but we can understand her objection. It's ours, too. If I give off the top maybe I won't have enough left over.

But let's look at the story again. For it gives us assurance and takes away our objection. Elijah said. "For thus says the Lord 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." God promised that if she did what Elijah asked, she would have enough. So trusting God's promise, she gave to Elijah, though she must have wondered how in the world it would be fulfilled. Scripture says that "she, as well as Elijah and her household ate for many days. 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." God kept his word, as he always does. The widow gave first fruits, and God made sure she had enough.

It's a Biblical principle. When you give first fruits to God, God will make sure you have

enough for your needs. God makes sure you have enough. God says, "Don't be afraid. Give to me first and you will have enough. I will make sure of it." We don't have to worry about the how. God takes the burden upon himself of making sure you have enough. I cannot explain how it happens. I can't explain how the widow's jar of meal was not emptied, or how the jug of oil kept getting filled up. It's mysterious, even miraculous. But that's fine. God's work is always beyond our full understanding.

Do you always want to have enough for your needs? Give the first fruits of your income to God. Now I don't believe as some claim, that God will make us wealthy if we give first fruits. But if we give first fruits God will make sure we have enough for our needs. God makes sure we have enough. This truth was clearly endorsed by Jesus when he said, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and all the things that you need will be added unto you."

Now you say, how can I be sure? Well, it's a matter of trusting and doing. When we say we trust God that means doing what he says and trusting him to keep his word. The God of the Bible always keeps his promises. God had promised through the prophets to send the world a Saviour. And he kept his word by sending His only Son to live and die and rise again for our salvation. If God provided for our greatest need in Jesus Christ, then he will certainly provide for all of our other needs, too. So put God to the test. Step out onto his promise. Give the first fruits to God, and God will make sure that you have enough for your needs. The way to know it, to be sure, is to do it. When you sit down and make up your budget, put God first. I'm not telling you a dollar amount or a percentage. But let the portion you give for God's work be the first portion you set aside. God-honouring stewardship begins with putting God first. And you will have enough for all your other needs, and probably much more besides. God will make sure of it. "She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. 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."

But I'm going to ask you to do something else related to this. You know the work the church does. It is Kingdom work with eternal significance. You have heard of our needs today. So I'm going to give you the 10% challenge. No, I'm not asking you to give 10% of your income. That is the Biblical tithe and some Christians certainly do give 10% income for Kingdom work. I do. But I'm not asking you to do that. I am challenging you to increase your weekly offering by 10% to the end of the year (and hopefully, you will be continue into 2010). When I was a kid and I had a \$20 bill in my wallet I felt well off. I still like the look of a \$20 bill in my wallet. But that \$20 doesn't look as big now as it did years ago. What tends to happen is that over the years our giving to the church gets stuck at the same level. Some people who were giving \$20 per week ten years ago still give \$20 per week. Now it's still substantial and welcomed. But it doesn't go as far as it did. So if you give \$20 a week, make it \$22 per week to the end of the year. Do you give \$10 per week? Make it \$11. Do you give \$50? Make it \$55. Do you give \$100? Some do, you know. Every church needs a few generous givers like that. Make it \$110. If you give a \$200 gift at Christmas make it \$220. Whatever you are giving right now or plan to give, increase it by 10%. And I can say on the authority of God's word that you will have

enough left for your needs.

When you give first fruits for God's work, God will make sure you have enough for your needs. God makes sure you have enough. Oh, we still work and do our best. We still have to be wise in our use of money. But God takes upon himself the burden of making sure we have enough. And why not? This is God's world and God is not limited in what he can do for his people. So trust him. Step out in faith. "For God is able," says Paul, "to do immeasurably more than all we can think or ask or imagine."