

"LEFTOVERS AGAIN!"

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
November 6, 1983
Luke 21:1-4

Years ago in rural Minnesota, I was calling on parishioners and happened on a particular home at lunch time. Now, after you are in the ministry for a time, you begin to learn the system, and pick out the homes you "happen" to hit at meal time. I was greeted at the door, "Come in, glad to see you. We are just sitting down to lunch. Won't you join us?" I gave the usual line, "Oh, I shouldn't, but..." She said, "We are having musgoes." Intrigued I asked, "What are musgoes?" She replied, "Oh, that's when you open the refrigerator door, and say, 'This must go. That must go.' A fancy name for leftovers." We had a delightful time, laughed and enjoyed the time together.

But, wouldn't the hostess be embarrassed if she had invited guests to dinner, forgotten the event, and had to serve musgoes? How would you feel if you forgot? Especially if it was your employer? Or, the Reagans, the President? How would you feel if you served leftovers to the Reagans? I would feel embarrassed, ashamed, angry at myself, guilty. It would not be a joyful, satisfying experience.

Many Christians serve the Lord leftovers and wonder why there is so little joy and satisfaction in their religion. Many Christians are bumbling along in their Christian life feeling guilty, joyless, embarrassed, ashamed, and wonder why. Who was it that said: many of us have just enough religion to make us miserable.

A family was having their typical meal one Sunday noon, namely, Pick-the-church-apart, served with griping, complaining, and growling. The father particularly was into it this particular Sunday. He complained about the music, the choir was offkey, the organ was too loud, the preacher preached too long, the sermon didn't have any point, the building was cold, no one spoke to him, etc. Finally the young son of the family interrupted, "But, Dad, you must admit it was a pretty good show for a dollar!" Sometimes negative comments and pick-the-church apart - pastimes reflect more about the speaker than the church. For the joylessness, the complaining, the growling might just reflect a leftover stance. We give leftovers and then complain, because we really do not feel good about ourselves or our participation.

Let's give God the main course, rather than the leftovers. Let's move beyond the point of misery, guilt, and anger to joy, satisfaction, and fulfillment. Let's go all the way with our commitment.

During the last week of Jesus' life, which he spent in Jerusalem, Jesus spent time in the temple, teaching, debating. After spending most of his life in the north country, it must have been a gratifying experience to finally go to the temple. The temple was the heart of Jewish religion. To go to the temple was the dream of every Jew throughout the Roman Empire. "How lovely is thy dwelling place, O Lord," they sang. "I'd rather be a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord than dwell in the tents of wickedness."

Jesus was in the temple, according to our Gospel lesson this morning, watching the offering box. Why? Why was Jesus watching the offering box? He had been attacked. He had been opposed. He knew trouble was brewing for him, right here in this temple. Perhaps he was studying the people of Jerusalem. Perhaps he was looking for insights into what was happening to him. Perhaps he knew one of the significant methods understanding a person is to look at them giving, to look in their checkbook and study the check register. What a person is, is spelled out clearly by how income and savings are handled. You can listen to people talk. You can listen to dreams and goals. But, the checkbook tells the real tale about all of us. Jesus phrased it graphically,

"Where your treasure is, there shall your heart be also." The center, the priority, the heart is really revealed in the accumulation and expenditure of money.

Jesus watched the offering box. He watched several wealthy persons put in substantial amounts, with no comment from Jesus. Then, a woman, a widow, put in two coins. Probably without ostentation, probably a trifle nervous, certainly quietly and humbly, she put in two small coins. Jesus made a very surprising comment, which did not further his popularity. His popularity was wavering as it was, and this commendation of a poor widow in contrast to rich, influential people was not very political.

Jesus said that the size of the offering is not what is important from God's perspective, but what it represents, whether the offering is leftovers or the main course. Jesus said, "This poor widow has put in more than any of them; for these have all contributed money they had left over, but she from the little she had has put in all she had to live on." They gave from what they had left. She gave from her substance. They gave leftovers. She gave the main course.

Next year we celebrate the 200th birthday of the Methodist movement in the United States. The Methodist movement spread across this country like wildfire, primarily because of the circuit rider. This method of dispatching ministers made for prime effectiveness. The minister traveled, converted people to Christ, and organized churches. The lay people cared for the local churches. The circuit rider was a hazardous occupation. Of the first 672 circuit riders on the frontier, 2/3 died before they had served 12 years. Half of them died before they reached the age of 33. When they gathered together annually, called the Annual Conference, they began by singing (as we still do), "And are we yet alive and see each other's face? Glory and thanks to Jesus give, for his almighty grace." They gave God the main course. They gave their all.

In the tradition we meet here today as their spiritual descendants. In that tradition we accept our call. In that tradition, the Fullers and the Norrises have come to be your ministers. We believe we are responding to God's call. We hold nothing back. We risk. We sacrifice, as so many of you do. Together, we are the people of God.

God does have a plan. Perhaps you look at the world today and wonder what God is doing, or is it out of control. God does have a plan - to create a people to be his body, his vehicle in the redemption of the world. Because of God's love and grace, God has a plan for redemption. Through your baptism, God called you. Those who will respond to the covenant which God makes with us are called to be God's people. God organizes a people to be his body on this earth. The people of God are nurtured, trained in the church, and then sent out into the world to serve God, so that the world might be redeemed, that people may hear the gospel, that peace and justice may prevail, that the hungry may be fed, the oppressed freed, the unloved loved. That is God's plan: to redeem this world by calling and sending a people.

God has called us and given us the means, the ability, the resources, and the power to be his people. We have been given all that is necessary. We are now the managers, the trustees, the executors. Many wills leave the estate in trust for the widow or the children. A trustee manages the estate on behalf of the owner and carries out the wishes of the owner. God is the owner. You are the manager. God has entrusted to you the care of the earth: the gospel. God has given you wealth, health, talents, and time. Your call is not to power or privilege, but to trust and responsibility. We will sing in the closing hymn today, "All that we have is thine alone, a trust, O Lord, from thee."

For the Christian, the difference between main course giving and leftover giving is this: The leftover giver asks, "How much shall I give to God?" The main course giver asks, "Because all that I have is God's, how much shall I keep for myself?"

Time is a gift from God. Your time belongs to God. You are a caretaker, a manager, a trustee, a steward, of your time. The question to ask is not, "How much of my time shall I give to God?" The question to ask is, "Because I am a part of God's people engaged in mission for the sake of the world, all my time is God's, how much time shall I spend on myself?"

Your talents, skills, abilities are gifts from God. God made you, endowed you with special gifts and unique talents for a purpose. You live now at this time and in this place for a purpose as one of God's people. The question is not: "How much of my talents do I share with God?" The question is, "Because my talents are for God's work and all belong to God, how much of my talents do I keep for myself?"

Your income and savings are gifts from God. Of course, you worked. But the reason for it all is to do God's ministry in this world. The question is not "How much do I give to God?" The question is, "Because all my money has been entrusted to me for God's work, how much do I keep for myself?" The biblical standard is not unreasonable - 90% for you! 10% for God, the rest for you (and the government)!

If you lack joy in your religion, if you lack satisfaction and fulfillment, if you feel weary and negative, perhaps you feel guilty, embarrassed, and useless; perhaps you do not have a good feeling about yourself and how you are living your life; perhaps you are giving leftovers of your time, talents, and money, when God asks for your "all", asks for a total, unreserved commitment.

Will you make a total commitment to Jesus Christ in response to his love for you? Then, you will move from misery to joy, from guilt to fulfillment, from the left overs to the main course. There is joy, then, because God throws in the dessert as a bonus.

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DOUGLAS NORRIS
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

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