

**SERMON – 23RD PENTECOST
CELEBRATION SUNDAY
LEVITICUS 19:9-10 & LUKE 21:1-4
NOVEMBER 17, 2019**

“A ‘MITEY’ FINE FAITH”

If folks know anything about the Old Testament book of Leviticus it's from its' references to dietary and worship rituals, prohibitions over what you can plant in your field and make your clothes out of. Passing it off as a relic of ancient Israel is understandable and yet unwarranted - even unwise. Leviticus 19 is part of what was called Israel's "Holiness Code" –and that code was predicated upon four crucial words – "*I am the Lord.*"

Essentially, those words say – "since this is how I am – so should you be." Leviticus 19:2 says as much – '*be holy for the Lord your God is holy*', words Jesus uses in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:48. Leviticus 19:18 says "*love your neighbor as yourself*", which Jesus says in Luke 10:27 is the second greatest commandment next to "*love the Lord your God.*" We downplay Leviticus wrongly – even though our selection from it today seems at odds with modern practices. No one leaves crops in the field if the weather doesn't force them to, and not many strangers, if they found unharvested grain somewhere, would hop on a combine and go help themselves to it.

"*I am the Lord*" meant not just the Lord of Israel, but the earth. God chose to become known to the world - then at least, through the faith of Israel, which meant the actions of Israel. Israel was different, and part of that "differentness" was generosity. A foreigner might ask "*Why don't you gather up all your grapes for yourself – why do you leave them for the poor?*" The answer was '*because the Lord is our God.*'

I believe Jesus is listening intently to Leviticus 19 when, as Luke 21 says, he is staring intently at the giving habits of folks in the temple. In what has come to be known as the story of the "widow's mite", Jesus is watching Israel give to the temple treasury, as they were commanded to do, and singles out a woman for her sacrificial offering. How Jesus knew this was "*all she had to live on*" is unclear. For our purposes, the point is the contrast with the seemingly large amounts given by people of means.

Most of the time we preachers would use this story as our lever to extract a larger commitment to the congregation from you, and if the passage exerts that kind of influence on you that may be part of why Luke reported it. Giving generously, even sacrificially, is a good and godly thing. That is not primarily why Luke told this story though.

The story of the "widow's mite" might sound like a command to "give all" just as, in Luke 18, Jesus commanded a rich young ruler to "sell all." If one thought Leviticus was full of stringent commands, you might be surprised that it comes to our aid interpreting Luke – by lifting up "small portions" - not entire portions. The command about leaving the edges of your field or grapes on the ground for the poor concern small portions – if you will, "*farmer's mites*", yet their dedication to the Lord by being made accessible to the poor made the act "holy." Jesus notices 'large and small' in our story from Luke, that's true. He does so because all Israel, rich and poor alike were called "to be holy." He recognizes the "mite" and "the mighty" but in so doing reminds the mighty to remember the sort of folks Leviticus intended them to take care of.

Paul, in our lesson from Philippians gives a personal testimony about what it is like to be on both ends of the comfort spectrum – to know “plenty and want.” He commends the Philippians for aiding, out of their abundance, he and others “in their want.” When I was in seminary, Marcella and I had two young kids, two part-time jobs, and, as I recall, full time concern about how this was all going to work. I can’t overstate how grateful I am for those days. One Christmas we went to North Dakota. Marcella’s brothers farmed summers and carpentered winters to make a go of it. That Christmas I helped them one day on a pole barn they were hired to put up for a neighbor. Actually, I tried to make myself useful by mostly staying out of the way!

Weeks later, I got an envelope in the mail from my brother in law Glen – in it was a check for \$100. I had no idea what it was for - Glen wasn’t big on paperwork! So Marcella called and found out it was my “pay” for that day I mostly tried staying out of the way. A couple of years later in my last year of seminary, we were up to three kids and one part time job! About a month in, I got an envelope from Upper Missouri Bible Camp, where I’d spent a couple of weeks during my internship keeping track of my confirmation class. They sent me \$150 for, from what I could recall, staying out of the way of the counselors. I was getting good at that sort of thing!

Neither a large amount, but when you put a triple digit check into a bank account with a running balance that’s usually in the double digits, as I recall we often were, you learn about how much giving means. As amounts go, both would have qualified as “mites” – but let me tell you it felt ‘mighty’ good entering them on the credit side of the check register. I know just a little bit about what it’s like to be in want – just enough to be eager to give now that I have plenty.

So pardon my pun, but it feels “mighty good” to give, and I hope you will give generously and gratefully when we ask for your commitment next week. In very “Levitical” language, Paul calls giving “*a fragrant offering and pleasing sacrifice to God.*” It made his ministry possible, and makes a lot of Christian ministry possible where here, in the name of Christ we now get the privilege of proclaiming the riches of his grace. But above all that, it is an expression of your faith, precisely the thing our Good Lord Jesus seems to have an eye for, and loves about you most. AMEN