

Saving Life in a Bag with Holes

Haggai 1:3-6

Dr. M. Craig Barnes

Sunday, November 1, 1998

When it comes to stewardship, our greatest temptation is to say that we will give more when we can afford it. But the claims of God can never be put off to the affordable future. That's not because God needs our money. It's because we need to be giving today. *** Five hundred eighty six years before the birth of Christ, the unthinkable happened. The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonian armies. The Hebrews believed that temple was the home of God, the sacred center of their world. It was the place where human need and divine grace met together. As the Hebrews were carried off into captivity, and were dragged past the demolished home of God, they saw the altar of the Lord laying on its side in the rubble and wondered, "How could God have allowed this to happen?"

It should not have been a surprise. Their prophets had warned them of this day for years. "If you do not do justice, if you do not let that justice roll down like the waters, God will take away your worship." But the people did not listen to their prophets, and they did not do justice. Now it was too late.

For a couple of generations, they lived as captives in Babylon. But then Babylon itself fell to Persia. The Persians let the Hebrews return to their devastated homeland. You would think the Hebrews would rush home to rebuild their temple, city, and the walls around it. But their leaders had a hard time getting the people to work together for any of this. When times are hard and people are not convinced about God's presence, they tend to worry only about their own lives.

The Hebrews had now been living in the rubble of Jerusalem for about 18 years. During that time they each planted their own crops, they rebuilt their own homes, and they tried to make a little money for themselves. But the Lord's house remained in ruins. There was no symbol of God in their midst.

We are also living in a society in which people are not convinced God is in their midst. Maybe they have seen too many dreams destroyed. Maybe they have been carried to a place in life they did not want to go. Perhaps a place of loneliness or grief. Maybe they have just lived too long in an unjust world. When that happens, like those before us, we give up our great dreams for the people. We each tend to our own gardens. We worry about our jobs and our homes, our money, and our bills. We do what we can to protect ourselves against an unpredictable future. And maybe, if at the end of the month, if there is some money left, we will even give some to the church.

Now our church is not lying in ruins. But the church is not the same thing as the temple. We do not limit God's dwelling to this building. After Christ's death, when the curtain dividing the Holy of Holies from the rest of the world was ripped in two, the dwelling of God was released into the world. Now the dwelling of God is found wherever Christ is proclaimed and where justice is done in his name.

At our church the dwelling of God is found not only in our worship, but also in our mission ministry in the inner city, Bosnia, the West Bank, and the Dominican Republic. These are places where the kingdom of God appears to be in ruins today. The dwelling of God is also found in our nurture ministry when children, youth, and adults grow in God's Word, where people are discovering their gifts, and where small groups of people meet in homes to nurture their identity in Christ. That's pretty important because we are all living in a society whose spirituality is now in ruins. The dwelling of God is also found in our caring ministry when people leave this place to visit those in hospitals or nursing homes, and when a shaky hand is held tenderly in the name of Jesus Christ. And because two or three have come together in his name, he is present among them, and a life once thought to be ruined finds the healing of a Savior.

Now my guess is that not a one of you would say that these ministries are unimportant. You probably agree that this is how we find God's dwelling among us. You may even want to help support them, and would love to give a little more than you do. If only you could afford to. Maybe next year. Maybe as soon as you take care of some personal needs: get that kid through college, pay off that car loan, get a job that pays a little more money. Maybe when the market turns up again. You know that the kingdom is lying in ruins in this world, and would love to help rebuild it. But this isn't a good time for you.

In the second year of King Darius's reign, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by a prophet named Haggai. "Is it time for you to live in paneled houses while the Lord's house lies in ruins?... Consider how you have fared. You have sown much, but harvested little; you eat but you never have enough; you drink, but never have your fill; you clothe yourselves but no one is warm; and you that earn wages, earn wages to put them in a bag with holes."

When you allow your needs to define you, your life will be reduced to being a consumer who is never satisfied. Which by the way, is exactly how contemporary society does define us. And it expects us to be flattered by that. "Be a good consumer," it tells us. "You have needs, and we have the products that will help." The cathedral for the consumer is the shopping mall. The worship book is the catalogues that just keep coming in the mail. The liturgy is simply to buy one more thing that you really need. And the mission is simply never to be satisfied.

On the first day, of the eleventh month of this year, the Word of the Lord comes to us as well. "Consider how you have fared," says the Lord. "You never have enough!" We do not dare enter into the house of the Lord as consumers, thinking that if we like what we see here we will give God a few dollars. We are not peddling religious products here. That is because we refuse to define you by your needs. We will not call you a consumer. We insist on honoring you with your Biblical name of "steward."

From the beginning the Bible has defined us not by our needs but by our calling. We have been called caretakers of God's creation, people who are blessed to be a blessing, stewards of the manifold grace of God. All of these images claim that our lives have a sacred purpose to them. And that purpose is not to tend to our own gardens. Do you really think that at the end of your life, God is going to be impressed if you say, "Lord, you didn't have to worry about me. I wasn't a bother to anyone. I took good care of myself?" No, that will not impress God. He will tell you that you missed the point of life. The point is to be a good steward of the grace of God that is dwelling among us.

The word steward comes from the old English "stigwird," which was the title of the manager of the noble's holdings in medieval society. The stigwird's job was to care for the needs of the manor. It would be theft for him to take the Lord's money, use it for his own needs, and then give what was left over back to the Lord.

Stewards realize that they don't own a thing in this world. Not a thing. God is the only creator, the only owner of the things we collect in this world. The job of the steward is to use what has been entrusted to us for the Lord of the house.

So the real question isn't how much of what you are holding belongs to God. It is all God's! The real question is what kind of return is he getting from his investment in your life?

For the first three centuries of the church's history it was often persecuted. The church was very poor. The members of the church had so many pressing needs. But the struggling church continued to grow until it eventually won over the whole empire. They accomplished this by doing two things very well. For one, they talked a lot about Jesus Christ. Secondly, they demonstrated his love by giving to the needs of those around them.

The church in Rome was particularly good at this. They went to the jails. They collected abandoned children and began the ministry of orphanages. They cared for the widows who were destitute. They buried the homeless who had died on the streets. They sent supplies to others churches that were struggling. And through it all, the dwelling of God in the midst of human suffering was made evident. In the second century, Ignatius of Antioch said the church in Rome was the "leader in love."

We are now the church in Rome. We are the church of the most powerful city in the world. When the struggling churches around the world speak about The National Presbyterian Church, are they calling us a "leader in love?" They could say that, but only if we turn our attention from our own needs to joyfully serve as good stewards of the grace that is dwelling among us.

O God, you have created us as glorious creatures, made in your image. As you so loved the world that you gave even your son, so may we give in seeking first your kingdom and your righteousness.