

Covenant Word

Emptied

I Corinthians 11:23b-29, Luke 21:1-4, Philipians 2:1-11

*A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
Jackson Shelton
Pastor
Sunday
February 3, 2008*

Fred Craddock often tells stories of growing up during the depression in rural Tennessee. He says that those living in his community often felt isolated with no television, no radio, and no transportation. He comments that you had to be tough to survive, especially if you were a child. While times were hard, Fred says that when he thinks back on it, as

strange as it sounds, he was really rich. For instance, a big storm came

through his community. The wind blew hard and it rained so much that the adults kept saying it was "raining frogs." So once the rain stopped, and the wind quit blowing, Fred, about eight years old at the time, went out into the yard to check the truth of the adults' comments. He went looking for tadpoles in his family's front yard.

Instead of frogs, however, Fred found lying in their yard a one dollar bill. A one dollar bill from somewhere...he had no idea from where. But it was a one dollar bill! Being drilled in honesty, Fred took it inside to his mother.

"Momma, I a-found a dollar bill in the yard."

"It's not yours."

"Well, whose is it?"

"I don't know, but I'll find out."

So for days, his mother talked with the neighbors to see who had had a dollar bill blow away from them and into the Craddock's yard.

No one claimed it, so his mother finally came to Fred and said, "Well, I guess it's ours."

Without a moment's hesitation, Fred corrected his mother. "No, Mamma, it's mine." Fred had big dreams for that one dollar, but his mother was way too practical for the bars of chocolate for which he longed.

"It's ours and we're goin' to the store."

So they went to the community store and with that one dollar, they bought Fred a shirt and bibbed overalls that matched. The overalls were blue and white striped and no one at school had a pair like them. There were two pockets on the back, two pockets on the front, a hole for your watch chain (if

you had a watch), a little pocket for a pencil, and a loop for your hammer or a small hatchet. These were really hard times and to get a pair of overalls with all those pockets and a shirt that matched was really, really something great.

After making the purchases, there were two pennies left over. So Fred's mother put the two pennies in a St. Joseph Aspirin box and said, "That's enough for you to rattle." The pennies fit perfectly into his pockets along with a magnifying glass. Now an eight year old boy can do all kinds of things with a magnifying glass. Besides satisfying his curiosity about every little thing, he can collect the sun's rays and start a fire. He can even burn a blister on someone's hand when they are not looking!

With his pockets comfortably full, Fred felt really rich. He had new bibbed overalls with a shirt that matched. He had pennies to rattle in one pocket. He had a magnifying glass in another pocket, and in yet another pocket, he kept a magnet. Fred could really impress the girls at school with that magnet. He'd have them hold out a piece of paper and put a thumb tack on top. Then he'd slip his magnet up under the paper and make the tack mysteriously move.

He was really something with those new bibbed overalls that had a shirt to match, his pennies, the magnifying glass and the magnet. But the item that really made Fred the hero of all his friends was the chicken's foot that he kept ready for use at any time in his hip pocket. One day, when his mother was preparing a chicken for a special occasion, she had cut the leg all the way up to the first joint where the tendon was still attached. She gave it to Fred and showed him how you could pull on the tendon and the foot would still work. But when she gave it to him, she warned, "Don't take this chicken foot to school and scare Mary Ann with it." Fred just smiled and thought to himself, "Parents sure do give good suggestions!"

Fred sat behind Mary Ann at school. She was always dressed up and pretty like she was going to have her picture made. So on that eventful day, Fred tapped her on the shoulder. Mary Ann looked around. Fred pulled the tendon and the chicken foot began to move. She screamed and went running out of the room. The teacher went after her, and while the teacher was out of the room, the rest of the children had a good time.

Fred says: "I was the hero of the day! I had a chicken foot, a magnifying glass, a magnet, new bibbed overalls and a shirt to match. I was rich! So impressed with myself was I that I would sometimes go sit on the front porch just to watch myself pass by."

Fred's story has me wondering: ***When you empty your pockets, what is there that assures you that***

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting
to read and study these
thoughts more
carefully. Please know
that I do not take full
credit for anything that
may be contained
within, because I may
have read or heard
something at some point
during my pilgrimage
and do not remember
its source and thus,
cannot give the rightful
author his/her credit. I
pray that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.
Sarah Shelton**



**Baptist Church of the
Covenant**

Where Faith Comes to Life.

2117 University Boulevard
Birmingham, AL 35233-3188

205-328-0644
FAX 205-328-6060

Worship with us each Sunday
morning at 9 a.m. and
for Bible study at 10:30 a.m.

you are rich?

From time to time, I take my ministerial robe to the cleaners in our neighborhood. I show the worker the spots that need some special attention and inevitably, she will ask me, “When would Mr. Shelton like his robe back?” I gently remind her each time that it is my robe and that I will need it back before the next Sunday.

We had recently gone through this little ritual of ours when she thought to ask me if there was anything in the pocket of the robe. As I began to pull one thing after another from the pocket, she observed, “You sure got a lot of weird stuff in there.” I hated to correct her yet one more time, so I quietly took the contents, put them in the envelope she provided me, and came home.

The truth about those contents is that they represent my riches.
<Empty contents on communion table>

For you see, there was a Jeffrey pencil to remind me of the joy of your laughter the night we listened to Kathryn Tucker Windham tell stories.

There was a fish hook to remind me of the bond with our deacons to live with such integrity that we too could be fishers of men and women.

There was a smooth stone from Chris Hamlin’s installation at Tabernacle Baptist that speaks to me of intentional friendship as we build altars at which to worship like the Israelites when they crossed into the Promised Land.

There was a packet of corn from our community Thanksgiving service that reminds me of the other houses of worship who attempt to bring light into our community and for whom I give thanks.

There was a small plastic heart that our youth gave us to wear on our key rings as a reminder of our love for one another.

There was a broken shell left over from a children’s sermon where we were reminded that we are salvageable as things of beauty in the eyes of God even when we are broken.

There was a commemorative coin from Hunter Street Baptist Church’s centennial celebration that David Henderson slipped to me one Sunday. While I am tempted to be sassy and say it reminds me to pray for my enemies, perhaps it is more honest to say that it challenges me to do what is printed on the back of the coin. The words of Jesus found there say, “You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself.”

There was an African necklace that brings the Swahili songs and dances joyfully alive in my ears.

There were marbles to remind me of the day that we laid down all the unnecessary rules that we carry around and then picked up only love for God and love of neighbor as our rules for living.

There was a handkerchief from the day that I confessed to you about my Dad’s second funeral.

She was right, you know. To anyone else, it would be a “bunch of weird stuff.” But to me, it was a wealth of treasure as memories filled me of the many times we have come together in full accord, with one mind and one spirit, to humbly look after the interests of one another in selfless concern. To borrow Paul’s words to the Philippian church, these shared experiences and the memories of them “make my joy complete.”

I believe that this is also the key to understand why the poor widow reached into her pocket and emptied it that day in the Temple as Jesus and His disciples watched from a distance. She reached down to the very seams of her pocket and found there the only two coins that were in her possession. The coins did not even equal a penny by our standards. But it was all she had. Those two coins represented the sum of all of her possessions. So she reached in and emptied her pocket by placing the coins into the Temple’s collection plates.

Jesus points her out to the disciples. He did not romanticize her small gift nor did He strike out against the larger ones. He weighed all the gifts by a standard that was the same for all. The standard was: how much remains after the offering is made? Rather than looking at the size of the gift, Jesus was more concerned with how much still remained after the gift was made. Thus measured, the widow’s gift was by far the greatest, because she had nothing left. The offering of everything, whatever the amount, was marked held up as the model gift. (Fred Craddock, Interpretation: Luke)

If I had been there that day, I would have slipped away from Jesus and sought out this woman. While her example is enough, I would have wanted to know why. What was her motivation for giving in such a sacrificial way?

Was she testing God... giving the last of her resources to see if God would intervene on her behalf?

Was she so duty driven that she would give her last coins?

Was she giving up?

Was she ignorant of financial matters and unaware of how this might impact her future?

Was she just so poor that those coins would not have made any difference whether they were in her pocket or not?

OR was it that the act of giving was such a privilege, a tangible way of expressing the thanks she felt in heart, that to give all she had made her joy complete?

While any of these options could be true, I believe the reason that Jesus noticed her was because her sacrificial gift foreshadowed His own. Here was a woman who got it. She so loved God that she understood God’s requirement was to empty

I believe the reason that Jesus noticed her was because her sacrificial gift foreshadowed His own....She so loved God that she understood God’s requirement was to empty herself of everything in order to belong completely to God.

herself of everything in order to belong completely to God. And so she did...she gave it all. Nothing was held back.

It is what Jesus did too. The Philippian passage says: "He emptied Himself..." "He poured Himself out until not a drop was left..." "He was an expiation..." an offering made to purchase our redemption.

The last item I pulled from my robe pocket is also the first item that I put back in and carry with me always. It is a pocket cross. It serves as a constant reminder of the sacrificial way He emptied His life upon the cross for our sakes and the commitment I have made to pick up His cross and follow Him.

It is, after all, why we come to this table, for we come to remember and to be thankful for this Christ who shares His body and blood with those of us who dare to follow His example and be emptied.

Let us pray:

Oh Lord, Our God, we gather around Your table realizing that we come with full pockets. So before we partake of this sacred meal, we take the time to empty the contents of our pockets on the table. We pray, therefore, O Lord, that You would:

Empty us of our pre-conceived ideas, prejudices, and cultural biases. So that we might be filled with the conviction that as children created in Your image, we will love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

Empty us of our fears, inadequacies, and insecurities so that we might be filled with strength and courage to boldly go forth as Your witnesses.

Empty us of our bondage, captivity and addictions to the things of this world so that we might be filled with the freedom to be wholly Yours in body, mind and spirit

Empty us of our despair, distress, and grief so that we might be filled with joy and hope, peace and love.

Empty us of the petty disagreements, judgments and anxieties that we enjoy harboring so that we might be filled with harmony, shared purpose, and a vision for Your kingdom.

Empty us of our self-absorption, personal justifications, and inflated estimations of ourselves so that we might be filled with such selflessness and humility that we are known as having the same mind as Christ's

We are so grateful for Christ...His life and ministry amongst us; His words that challenge and inspire us to this day; and for His life that He emptied in service to us and ultimately upon the cross.

As we eat of this bread and drink of this cup, may we give over to You the contents of our lives, that You may re-shape us into instruments worthy of service to You.

For we make this prayer in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.