

Am I Enough?

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

Sunday, 1 October, 2023

Children's Talk: Boundless Love

What happens when a car runs out of petrol? It can't drive anymore and needs to go to the petrol station. What happens when a phone dies? It can't turn on until it's been plugged in and charged. What happens when you run out of energy? You can't be active until you've slept and eaten. There are many things that are used up over time and then need to be refilled.

But what about love? Is love something that we can use up until it's gone and then we need to somehow fill it back up again? And if so, how do we do it? What is the spiritual version of a petrol station, a phone charger, and a nap and a snack? There's a story in the Lord's Word that gives us some thoughts about this. It is the story of a woman who had no money and only a tiny bit of oil. But the Lord was able to take that oil, to refill it and grow it, until she had enough to sell and buy everything she needed:

¹ A certain woman of the wives of the sons of the prophets cried out to Elisha, saying, "Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that your servant feared Jehovah. And the creditor is coming to take my two sons to be his slaves."

² So Elisha said to her, "What shall I do for you? Tell me, what do you have in the house?" And she said, "Your maidservant has nothing in the house but a jar of oil."

³ Then he said, "Go, borrow vessels from everywhere, from all your neighbours—empty vessels; do not gather just a few. ⁴ And when you have come in, you shall shut the door behind you and your sons; then pour it into all those vessels, and set aside the full ones."

⁵ So she went from him and shut the door behind her and her sons, who brought the vessels to her; and she poured it out. ⁶ Now it came to pass, when the vessels were full, that she said to her son, "Bring me another vessel."

And he said to her, "There is not another vessel." So the oil ceased. ⁷ Then she came and told the man of God. And he said, "Go, sell the oil and pay your debt; and you and your sons live on the rest." (2 Kings 4:1-7)

So when the woman needed more oil, the prophet told her to fill as many pots as she could with the tiny bit of oil she had left. Instead of running out right away though, it lasted until every last pot was full.

In this miracle, oil is a symbol of love. Doesn't it sometimes feel like you've run out of love and only have a tiny little bit left to give? Maybe you've tried to be patient with your parents so many times today, but they still aren't listening and you are running out of patience. Or maybe you've let your little sister have so many turns with your game but she keeps asking for another one and you are not feeling so generous anymore. Or maybe you have apologized a number of times to a friend but they still won't forgive you and now you are getting angry with them. We all have times when it feels like we have no love left to give.

So how do we fill that love back up? The first thing the woman with the oil had to do was listen to and trust the Lord's message. She could easily have laughed at Elisha: how could her little oil possibly fill even a single pot?! But she did not. She trusted that if she followed the Lord's instructions the oil would grow and grow and grow. So when you have only a little love left to give, do you believe that the Lord will give you more? If you do not, you will have a hard time continuing to love people. But if you do, if you really trust that you can do this, the Lord will make a miracle happen, and you will be able to love when it seemed impossible. But only if you are willing to trust and to try.

The second thing she did was take action, putting the oil into the individual pots she had collected. We do have to take action, based on what the Lord teaches us. That is what gives the love space to grow. When you are angry with your parents, if you try to keep loving them just inside yourself it will be hard. But if you put it into words, explain kindly what you feel, change your behaviour, maybe take a break and walk away, that allows the love to grow. With your sister, just letting her take all the turns and trying to feel love for her will be hard; but if you can sort it out kindly and work with her to come to a solution, the love will grow. With a friend who

won't forgive, continuing to demand forgiveness will only increase the anger.

Perhaps some distance, or even forgiving him for not forgiving you, will allow the love to grow.

So when you have no love left to give, do two things: first, trust that if you try, the Lord will miraculously give you more love, and second, don't just keep the love inside you: let it out into words and actions, trying to resolve things as the Lord would want. That is how we refill our empty hearts.

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Do you have enough? Do you do enough? Do you give enough? Are you, as a person, enough? These are the kinds of questions that we start to ask when anything is demanded of us. And we do have a lot that is demanded of us, whether intentionally or not. Children demand time, attention, love, and things. Spouses demand affection, support, and partnership. Society demands participation, good citizenship, a thousand good causes that need *you*. Your job demands every ounce of effort you can give, along with your skills, time, and dedication. Then on top of all that there's the Lord: He demands kindness, patience, forgiveness, generosity, charity, repentance, and a whole host of rules to be followed. So many people and so many things push us to have more, do more, give more, be more. With so many demands how can any one of us possibly be enough? How can any of us live up to the potential or the expectations that have been placed on us? So again, are you enough? Will you ever be enough?

To get to the heart of this question let's turn to the Lord's Word, to the story sometimes known as the widow's mite. This is a story that about the worth of what we give, and I think we often read it as a story about how important it is to keep giving even when it seems like we have nothing left to offer. But I think that we can also read it as a reframing of how the Lord sees the worth of what we give, and that perhaps what we are giving now already is enough. It takes place at the temple as people were coming to make their donations:

Now Jesus sat opposite the treasury and saw how the people put money into the treasury. And many who were rich put in much. Then one poor widow came and threw in two mites, which make a quadrans. So He called His disciples to Himself and said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; for they

all put in out of their surplus, but she out of her lack put in all that she had, her whole livelihood.” (Mark 12:41-44)

Among all these rich people making large (yet mostly token) donations, a poor widow came and put in two mites, two tiny coins. In today’s money they might amount to four rand. Yet Jesus praises her for having put in more than all the others.

As we explore this incident more I want to begin by orienting ourselves to who we are in the story. We all have times when we are like the rich donors. Those are the times when we give or take action, but solely for the sake of appearance and it costs us nothing. On the other hand, we all also have times when we can see ourselves as the poor widow: in comparison to others we don’t have much or have much to offer. Nor is this just our perception: we really do have serious deficiencies. You really are not the best employee. You really are not the best dad or mom. You really are not the best husband or wife or boyfriend or girlfriend. You really are not the best friend for that matter. You’re not the best person either. I don’t have to know you personally to know any of this. The fact is most of us are not the best. I know that I’m not the best pastor or the best school chaplain. Like all of us, my flaws are readily apparent to me.

The problem comes when we start to notice all the many areas we are lacking in or falling short and start to think we are only worth something if we are perfect. Or at least, as good as the people who seem to have everything right. The poor widow could have looked at her two coins, her four rand, compared it with the wealth that was pouring in from others, and decided to walk away. She could have regarded her measly donation as worthless, not even worth the effort of travelling to the temple and dropping it in the box.

We do that too with the deficient and lacking things that we have to offer: we compare ourselves with others and disregard what we have as next to worthless.

How often have you let someone down, and wondered why they deserved to have you in their life? Think of a single mom, on her own, who stays up all night with a crying child, helpless to do anything. As she despairs in the early hours of the morning, the thoughts constantly run through her head of how she was the cause of this child's suffering. If only she were a better mom. Her child deserves more. Or think of the friend who feels helpless when his mate's parent dies unexpectedly. He tries to say the right thing but it only seems to make things worse. So he withdraws from his friend's grief and feels like he has let him down. He deserved better friends, who could have helped him through a rough patch. We feel like we are not enough, so why bother?

But if we go back to the poor widow and her two coins, consider the contrast between how the people saw her donation and how Jesus saw it: in their eyes she had put in a pitiful amount, hardly worth the effort; in His eyes, she had "put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; for they all put in out of their surplus, but she out of her lack put in all that she had, her whole livelihood." The worth of her offering was not lessened by comparison with others. Her offering had immense worth in its own right. The Lord knew what it meant for her to give even so little. The amount was tiny, but it was enough. If this is the case with the poor widow, how must the Lord look on the single mom who thinks she's a failure? Or the friend who thinks he couldn't make a difference? In His eyes they are enough. He knows the value of what they offer. The fact that it is not perfect does not diminish its value or worth. They are enough.

How do we then get away from the need to be perfect and instead focus on the little that we can offer, that is enough? It's amazing how much we can think the Lord needs from us. We really can blow it all out of proportion and think that we have

to save the world or something. In the New Church this takes the form of a very particular sense of guilt around not being useful. We put so much emphasize on use: life is about being useful. The motto of the school is happiness in a useful life. We talk about finding your use. Everything is measured according to how useful it is. With this metric we are bound to fall short and feel like we never do enough. I mean, how can you get through your day of trying to be useful when you know people are starving, dying, addicted, killing each other, afflicted with cancer and so on. Wouldn't the most useful thing be to address these dire needs? If everything is measured by how useful it is to the world as a whole then I think that most of us would find we don't measure up.

But again, just like with the widow in the story, the Lord sees things very differently. To be the most useful we can be does not necessarily mean we have to save the world. We do not all need to be heart surgeons or start massive charitable organizations. In the Lord's eyes, to be useful is to do the best we can in the little corner of the world that we have been given. The Teachings of the New Church even declare that "it is not so difficult to live the life that leads to heaven as some people believe." And here's why:

That it is not so difficult to live the life of heaven as some believe can now be seen from this, that when anything presents itself to a man that he knows to be dishonest and unjust, but to which his mind is borne, it is simply necessary for him to think that it ought not to be done because it is opposed to the Divine precepts. If a man accustoms himself so to think, and from so doing establishes a habit of so thinking, he is gradually conjoined to heaven.
(*Heaven and Hell* §533)

Can you think in yourself what is right and wrong? Can you put some effort into doing the right and rejecting the wrong? That is enough. This same sentiment is echoed by the prophet Micah. In the minds of the people then the most useful and

important thing was to make extravagant sacrifices to Jehovah. But Micah makes clear that this is not at all what Jehovah wants:

With what shall I come before Jehovah,
And bow myself before the High God?
Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings,
With calves a year old?
Will Jehovah be pleased with thousands of rams,
Ten thousand rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
He has shown you, O man, what is good;
And what does Jehovah require of you
But to do justly,
To love mercy,
And to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:6-8)

We no longer think that the Lord wants us to sacrifice burnt offerings. But we do end up thinking that the Lord wants us to sacrifice other things: all our time, everything we enjoy, our careers, our goals and dreams, and if we do not give up everything for the sake of use, then we are falling short. But that is not at all what the Lord wants. What the Lord wants is that, as we pursue our dreams, as we follow our own journeys, as we make a life for ourselves, no matter what that looks like, that we do it justly, with mercy, walking with His guidance. It is not so hard to live the life that leads to heaven as we think. We can do, and many of us already are doing, enough. We can be enough, even in our lack.

So we return to the question we began with: am I enough? You are certainly not perfect. You certainly lack certain things. You are deficient in many areas, just like everyone else. But if in that deficiency you can still put in that little effort to improve and to serve, those two coins that seem so small compared to what everyone else has to offer, if you can do just that little part, then you can be enough. So while yes, we can all improve, we can all do things better, just for today I invite you to find one thing you have done well in service to others. Not something you did

perfectly. Not something that saved the world or saved your family. Just one small thing, and look at it as the Lord sees it: it is enough; you are enough. Rest contentedly with that. After all, that rest and that peace is exactly what the Lord wants to give us:

Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)