

Sermon Series: Shekels

November 24, 2013

## **Title: Thanksgiving: Needy or Greedy?**

Text: Haggai 1:1-14

Summary: Needy or greedy? We make the choice every day to either embrace our neediness and God's ability to provide, or to fend for ourselves, leaving God out of the picture. Thanksgiving only happens when we accept that we're needy!

### **A Lost Coin**

#### **Lost and Found:**

It was a spring day in Jerusalem. A man hurried along the great street that ran north to south under the shadow of the great western wall of the Temple Mount. He passed under a monumental causeway that led into the Temple enclosure far above. In his pocket or money bag was a coin that he would shortly use to pay his annual Temple head-tax. It was a silver coin called a didrachma or half-shekel, and was minted in Tyre, in A.D. 22.

But somewhere along the way the coin slipped out of his pocket or purse onto the stone-paved street. It continued its journey down one of the storm drains in the curb and came to rest in the drainage channel, or storm sewer, that ran under the street and carried rainwater out to the Kidron Valley.

And there it would lie, buried under 2000 years of mud and debris, until it was found by archaeologists in March, 2008.

#### **Needy:**

We've all been there: lost keys, lost wallet, lost phone, lost credit card. We put our hand in our pocket and the keys aren't there. We reach into our purse and the phone is gone. We retrace our steps, go back to the last store we visited or the restaurant where we had lunch. Questions, sympathetic faces, promises to give us a call if something turns up. But we go home empty-handed. All of a sudden we're *needy*.

Neediness, of course, comes in many forms. The paycheck that never stretches far enough. The layoff at work that comes out of the blue and leaves us out of a job. A relationship that fails to deliver the love and future it promised. The retirement commercial that reminds us we don't really *have* a retirement strategy.

So how to respond to ever-present neediness? In this old world we seem to have only one option: scabble around for a little more -- a little more money, a little more stuff, a little more security. But how much is *enough*? In this world's economy, you never know.

As a result, "enough" becomes a moving target: just a little more. It's an endless cycle from which there is no escape.

### **A Different Economy:**

God's Word, however, offers a very different perspective on neediness. Listen to how Jesus put it:

#### **Matthew 5:3-6 The Message**

**"You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.**

**" You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.**

**"You're blessed when you're content with just who you are-- no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.**

**" You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat."**

These are words that defy the way our old world operates. They are words spoken to people who have committed themselves to follow Jesus into God's New Creation, His Kingdom. And in that realm God's creative power operates best when we are needy! Being willing to be needy means being willing to trust Him. Being willing to be needy opens the door for Him to bless.

### **Needy or Greedy?**

#### **Whose house is most important?**

A little book near the end of the Old Testament gives us a glimpse of people whose sense of personal need had caused them to lose sight of God's Kingdom. They were people who had been in exile in faraway Babylon and had been granted permission to return home to Jerusalem. Some of them could remember how beautiful the city and its temple had been before the Babylonian army had burned everything to the ground. Now, they were the "remnant" that had returned -- with great hope for the future. But the future turned out to be more a battle for survival than anything else.

In the process of carving out a new life, it turns out that they had lost sight of God's priorities for them as a people. Listen to what God says to them through the prophet Haggai:

## **Haggai 1:2 NIV**

**This is what the Lord Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord's house.' "**

Why not? It wasn't because they didn't believe in God anymore. It wasn't because they didn't think that they needed a new temple to replace the one destroyed by the Babylonian.

Why not? Because they felt like they already had their hands full just staying alive. They were consumed with their own deep-felt sense of *need*.

Can we relate? Doesn't it seem like life just gets so busy and so expensive that some of the things we believe in and want to support *just have to wait*? What do they say: "The good is the enemy of the best"? Or, "If I had enough money, I'd \_\_\_\_\_! But...I don't."

### **Looking out for #1:**

God follows up with a second word for the people, this time in the form of a piercing question:

## **Haggai 1:3-4 NIV**

**Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?"**

And now the picture begins to come into focus: people had moved back to Jerusalem and had built themselves houses, but had not yet gotten around to building God's House. And as time went on people improved their houses -- so much so that Haggai calls them "paneled houses." Seems like things couldn't have been *that* bad!

But when you start focusing on meeting your needs, other things get moved to the bottom of the list. And that's why they needed a wake-up call from the LORD: "Is it a time...?"

### **How's it working for you?**

God speaks to the people again, challenging them to take inventory on how things are working for them:

## **Haggai 1:5-6 NIV**

**Now this is what the Lord Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You**

**drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it."**

God points out that they have become caught up in the endless cycle of neediness. Round and round, trying to get ahead by taking care of #1, but discovering that at the end of the day or the end of the season they're even further behind.

Can you relate? I know I can! Lost harvests, lost groceries, even lost coins.

**A way forward:**

God speaks one more time to the people, this time to offer them the way forward from neediness to His provision.

**Haggai 1:7-11 NIV**

**This is what the Lord Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored," says the Lord.**

**"You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?" declares the Lord Almighty. "Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with your own house.**

**"Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the olive oil and everything else the ground produces, on people and livestock, and on all the labor of your hands."**

By focusing on themselves and meeting their needs, the people had stepped away from the unique relationship that God offered them -- a relationship in which He would provide for their needs. Left to their own devices they experienced the relentless neediness of this old, fallen world.

But God offered the way forward: "Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house." Make God the first priority. Or as Jesus would put it many years later:

**Matthew 6:31-33 NIV**

**"So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly**

**Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."**

**"I am with you"**

**Heart Change:**

Haggai tells us that the people did indeed take to heart what God said to them. From the leaders right down to the ordinary people, they chose to obey God and make Him their first priority.

Three things happened as a result:

#1: God spoke to them again, promising to be with them all the way:

**Haggai 1:13 NIV**

**Then Haggai, the Lord 's messenger, gave this message of the Lord to the people:"I am with you," declares the Lord.**

God's Presence was the proof that their Exile was over. Not having a fancy home or a good bank account, a full barn or a closet full of clothes. God's Presence meant God's provision and God's blessing.

#2: God empowered them for the task ahead of them:

**Haggai 1:14a NIV**

**So the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people.**

Instead of a defeatist and selfish spirit, God inspired them with His Spirit, bringing them together to accomplish something that none could ever have even attempted on his or her own -- to build God's House.

Funny how things change when we get our priorities in order!

#3: The people got down to business:

**Haggai 1:14b-15 NIV**

**They came and began to work on the house of the Lord Almighty, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month.**

Haggai even tells us the day the work began. What an amazing change of heart for a community that had become self-absorbed with its needs instead of keeping its eye on what God had commanded them to do. Now they could truly become the People of God in the land that He had promised, with His promise that He would be present in the House they built for Him.

### **A coin lost and found:**

Matthew tells us a story about another coin that was lost and found. One day, with the tax day no doubt just around the corner, the tax collectors came to Peter and asked if Jesus was going to pay His tax. Peter, who had a habit of speaking first, then thinking things through afterward, assured them that Jesus would pay the tax.

Jesus must have overheard the conversation, and when they were alone He asked Peter if the King's kids had to pay taxes. Peter answered that the king's children wouldn't need to pay taxes; that was for others to pay. Jesus finished the conversation by saying on that basis neither He nor Peter needed to pay the tax:

### **Matthew 17:26b-27 NIV**

**“Then the children are exempt,” Jesus said to him. “But so that we may not cause offense, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours.”**

One of the common species of fish in the Lake of Galilee is a tilapia which is known to carry things around in its mouth. In the spring of the year these fish would have been scooping out their nests on the lake bottom. Jesus knew that one of them -- the first fish Peter was about to catch -- had found somebody's lost coin. Just what kind of coin? One that would cover two two-drachma tax bills.

### **Needy or Greedy?**

And isn't that what God was trying to get across to His people when He challenged them to step out in faith and start working on His House? They were King's Kids everyone of them. He longed to take them on a journey away from the limits and neediness of this old world.

But first, they would need to accept being needy instead of trying to be greedy.

You and I face the same challenge today. We live in a tired old world where neediness never goes away. The temptation: to focus on the needs, scabble together whatever we can, try to get ahead and hope for the best. We may have good intentions about reaching out beyond ourselves, but we are tempted to put our needs first.

God offers us another path. He challenges us to dare to trust Him, to put Him first in our lives, believing that He will be with us, will empower us, and will, as Paul writes, "meet all our needs, according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus." (Phil 4:19).

I'd like to ask you to join me in a faith challenge over the next several weeks. It will be a chance for us to examine our own hearts and see whether or not we are ready to help "build God's House in our time and place." On December 8th you will have the opportunity to fill out an anonymous pledge card indicating your regular giving for 2014. Your input will help us all best understand just what it is God wants us to do as a church in the coming year.

And as we all celebrate Thanksgiving this Thursday, let's remember that in order to truly say Thank You you must first of all be willing to be needy!