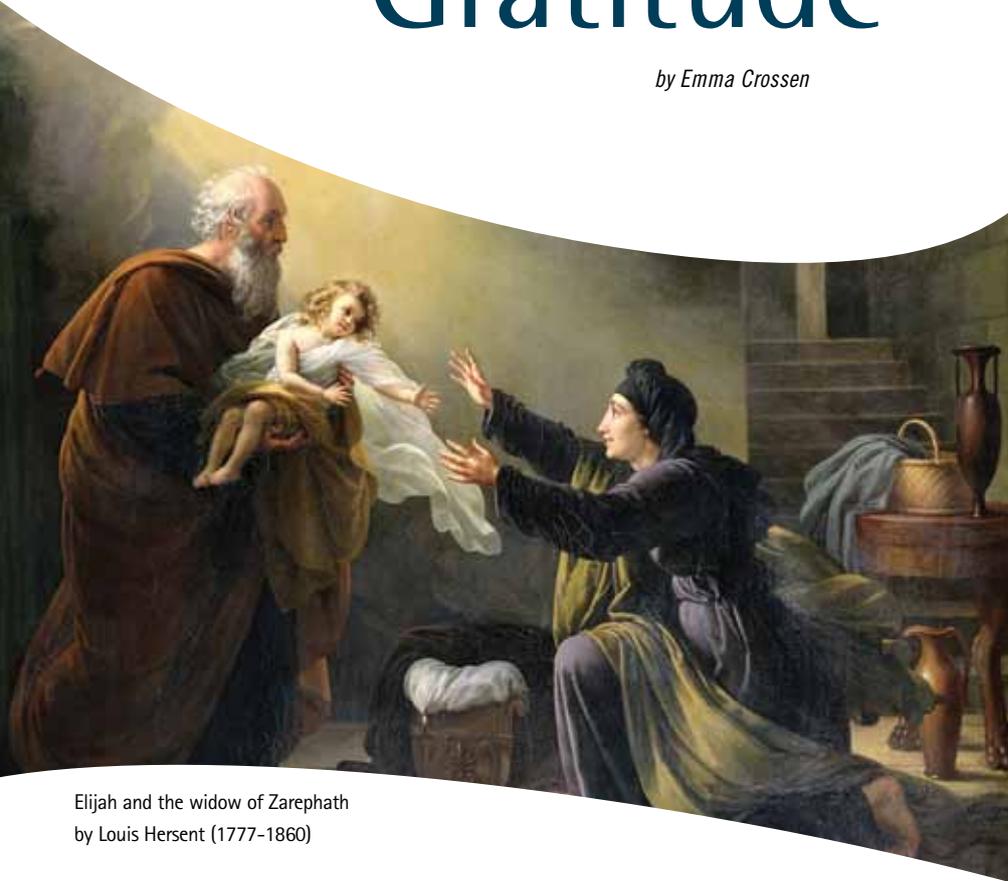


A Season of Gratitude

by Emma Crossen



Elijah and the widow of Zarephath
by Louis Hersent (1777-1860)

Gratitude is popular in November, though it usually goes by another name—Thanksgiving. Giving thanks often turns into giving other gifts. Charities raise most of their money at this time of year. Volunteers observe the holiday by serving a meal at a shelter or delivering food baskets to families. Yet, the link between gratitude and giving

is not automatic. Why not count your blessings and end it there? Christianity is one of many religious traditions that teach followers to go further and follow “I have been given much” with “therefore I should give.” Jesus put it this way in Luke 12:48: “From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required.”

For Christian disciples, giving thanks involves acknowledging our responsibility to give. The Thankoffering is one way that Christian women have encouraged the link between gratitude and giving. Begun in the late 19th century, the Thankoffering tradition encourages women to take a daily account of God’s blessings and, in response, give small offerings into a Thankoffering box. Then, at an annual Thankoffering worship service, women combine their individual collections to support mission and ministry. Among Women of the ELCA participants, November is a popular month for Thankoffering services. Thankofferings reinforce the idea that gratitude should inspire giving.

There is no simple formula for determining just how much we’re required to give. Instead, Jesus calls us to a discipleship that involves dedicating our whole lives to loving God and loving our neighbor. How do we figure out what it looks like to give our whole lives in discipleship? Certainly, it involves more than giving money. However, Scripture and history teach us that money is always part of discipleship.

In the biblical story of the widow’s offering at the treasury (Mark 12), Jesus compares the offering of a poor widow to the money offered by rich people. Though the widow only gives two small coins, Jesus

says that she gave more because she gave everything she had to live on. The message is clear—no matter how much you have to give, your money has value to God. Yet, Jesus is not saying that everyone should be poor and give small offerings. Rather, he praises the widow in order to criticize the rich for refusing to give a bigger portion of their wealth. Their money is needed, too.

Money can make a big difference if it is spent well. Before Jesus sees the widow at the treasury, he encounters a rich man who asks him how to get into heaven. Jesus tells the man to sell everything he owns and give it to the poor. He doesn't tell the rich man to leave his wealth behind or give it up, he tells him to put it to work meeting the needs of the world.

Meeting needs

What's at stake when we give our possessions is more than an attitude of generosity or feeling of gratitude. What's at stake is the wellbeing of our neighbors. This is illustrated in the story of Elijah and the Widow of Zarephath. Faced with drought and no food, Elijah goes to Zarephath because God tells him that a widow will feed him there. The situation looks grim when he learns that the widow is also hungry and desperate. Even so, Elijah convinces her that God will provide her with more food if she uses her

last bit of grain to feed Elijah. It works. Elijah receives food from the widow who goes on to receive food from God. Here, giving is not a symbolic gesture of faithfulness but a way to bring food to the hungry.

This impulse—to meet people's material needs by giving—was the original mission of Christian women's organizations. The first congregational women's societies were started for the explicit purpose of raising money and providing material support to the local congregation and, later, for global missionaries in the world.

Historian L. DeAne Lagerquist writes about this in her book, *From Our Mother's Arms: A History of Women in the American Lutheran Church*: "Initially, emphasis was placed upon the financial support that women provided to the church. The spiritual benefits to the church from their prayers were presupposed and the social and personal benefits to the women themselves were generally not stated. Women raised money in a wide variety of ways. Collecting an offering of 5 or 10 cents from each woman at meetings was common." Some groups even went so far as to loan money to local farmers at 10 percent interest.

Later, as the entire church focused more on international missions, women turned their attention outside the local congregation. The first national Lutheran women's

organization was started in 1879 to provide financial support to women missionaries who were denied funding by the all-male Board of Foreign Missions. Just as earlier women's societies sewed, cooked, and raised money for the local congregation, the Woman's Home and Foreign Missionary Society came into existence to raise money for specific mission work.

They recognized their gift for fundraising and used it to benefit the church. In so doing, they set in motion a cycle of connections and expansion that would help them discover all the other gifts God had given them to use.

Creating possibilities

Financial giving created relationships that introduced women to possibilities beyond their own ethnic communities and beyond traditional roles for women. They studied the countries where missionaries served and connected with foreign missions through prayer, correspondence, and missionary speakers at conventions.

In her book *Led by the Spirit: A History of Lutheran Church Women*, author Lani Johnson writes: "The support of missions became support of women's talents as individuals. The societies sent talented and courageous women to foreign lands, and their members participated vicariously in the reputations

and activities of those missionaries. In the process of organizing to support the missionaries, the church women acquired leadership skills that enhanced their own sense of self worth.”

Financial goals also led local women’s groups to combine their fundraising efforts and develop structures for managing money. For example, Lagerquist notes that the Women’s Missionary Foundation took a “businesslike” approach to money from the time it was founded in 1931, with annual audits, reimbursement policies, and bonding for officers that handled money. Partly to meet their financial goals, women’s associations developed structures that were similar to the male-dominated power structures, with elections, officers, and conventions. They proved to themselves that they were able and ready to be leaders and decision-makers on a national scale.

It took longer to persuade the larger church that women should have such influence. Johnson interprets the history bluntly: “Women were allowed enough freedom to be efficient resource gatherers, but not enough to be influential: the churches wanted their money, not their opinions.”

For example, it was 1938 before the Augustana Lutheran Church gave women voting membership on its mission board, even though women had raised much of the money for mission support in preceding years. It was 1970 before a Lutheran church in America ordained a woman to ministry.

Even so, while the church delayed accepting women as leaders in its own structures, women were not simply waiting around for the church to grant them political influence. They continued to give large annual sums to the church, but increasingly used offerings to

develop their own ministries. In the early-1900s, women’s associations focused resources on education for women. They published magazines and booklets to help women develop and lead their own programs, including Bible studies.

Lagerquist records the transformation that occurred in one congregation after a Bible study for women was introduced in the 1950s. Many women felt unqualified to take part and initially avoided meetings. Yet, 30 years later, those same women were teaching the lessons, volunteering on church committees, ushering, and serving as delegates for conventions, all of which were considered male roles in the 1950s. “The result of study,” Lagerquist writes, “was more informed and able members.”

Developing ministries

Within a century, what started as fundraising projects in the mid-1800s had turned into national

Photos: ELCA Archive



Women's Home and Foreign Missionary Society officers, Louisville, Ky., 1911



Women's Home and Foreign Missionary Society, 20th biennial convention, Wheeling, W.V., 1917

associations where women were discovering and using all their gifts, including the ability to lead, teach, and minister. This, in turn, shaped and directed their financial giving in new directions, which led to new relationships and more influence.

In 1969, Lutheran Church Women opened bank accounts in five community banks within depressed areas of Atlanta, Kansas City, Los Angeles, New York, and Philadelphia, to help those banks to provide more local loans and strengthen the economy in those areas. Inspired and emboldened by this witness, the women's organization successfully urged the entire denomination to adopt social criteria for its own investments.

In the 1990s, Women of the ELCA was one of the first organizations to provide a low interest loan to Equal Exchange to promote fair trade coffee. A decade later, Women of the ELCA helped reach

and exceed an unprecedented goal of getting Lutherans to purchase 90 tons of fair trade coffee, partnering with Equal Exchange and Lutheran World Relief. Through the 90-Ton Challenge, women also educated thousands of congregations about fair trade and economic justice.

Today, scholarships and grants continue to be an important part of how Lutheran women meet the needs of the world while deepening their understanding of what those needs are.

Additionally, money is an important part of how Women of the ELCA relates to the ELCA, giving hundreds of thousands of dollars each year for ELCA ministries like Global Mission, World Hunger, Disaster Response, and the Malaria Campaign. All the while, Women of the ELCA continues the tradition of developing ministries that are responsive to the needs of women and the whole church.

What women have known from the beginning is that money matters. Discipleship is never only about money, but money is always involved. That's what Scripture tells us. The history of women in the church illustrates why money is so integral to living as God wants us to live. Through giving, we meet the needs of the world and we come to better understand how we fit into that world.

In this season of gratitude, when thanksgiving becomes monetary giving, take inspiration from Scripture to know that your giving matters. And take a cue from history to consider these questions: How does your giving impact the world? How does it expand your horizons? How does it help you to recognize and take responsibility for all the ways that God has gifted you so that you can give into the world? 🌿

Emma Crossen is Women of the ELCA director for stewardship and development.

YOUR THANKOFFERINGS MATTER

Many of these ministries will be lifted up when congregational groups hold a Thankoffering service. Last year, Thankofferings totaled \$846,635.

This year, the goal is set at \$1,010,000. All of these dollars will support the ministries of Women of the ELCA, like training racial-justice advocates; producing resources about discipleship, stewardship, and justice; translating resources into Spanish; training and supporting women to be bold and effective leaders in Women of the

ELCA and the church; daily outreach through Daily Grace, Facebook, and Twitter; publishing *Gather* magazine and award-winning Bible studies that inspire and educate women in thousands of congregations; producing Café e-zine and podcast to reach multiple generations of women; and administering grants and scholarships to serve women and children in crisis, help Lutheran women pursue diverse careers, and equip congregations to start health ministries in their communities.

Thankoffering: Give with gratitude

For more than 100 years, Lutheran women have given thanks to God and dollars to mission through Thankofferings.



The executive board of the Women's Missionary Society of the United Lutheran Church in America, 1931. Photo: ELCA Archives.



Today, the tradition continues.

Read "All About Thankofferings" at womenoftheelca.org to learn how Thankofferings can be a daily practice for you and inspire stewardship in your community.

Thankofferings support all the ministries of Women of the ELCA, from advocacy and education to discipleship and outreach.

Send your personal or group Thankoffering to Women of the ELCA, PO Box 71256, Chicago, IL 60694-1256. Make check payable to Women of the ELCA. Write Thankoffering in the memo line. Groups may attach Form B.



Learn more

at womenoftheelca.org

- Download new Thankoffering Service
- Create your own Thankoffering box
- Donate online

