

It was late September 1904 but central Florida was experiencing one of their notorious late season heat waves. Leaning against his car, real estate agent John Williams took out his handkerchief and mopped the sweat from his brow. He thought to himself that he must be crazy to agree to meet anyone out here in the height of the noonday heat. But the prospect of renting a run-down house that had stood empty for an entire year made him forget the soaring temperature.

He watched as a woman walked down the road toward him. Her face broke out in a smile as she called out, "Hello there! You must be Mr. Williams. My name is Mary. Thank you for agreeing to meet me and show me this property on such short notice."

They opened the rusty gate, walked through the overgrown front yard, and up the broken steps, carefully avoiding the missing boards on the front porch. As they entered the house Mr. Williams told Mary, "Well as you can see, it's not much to look at. The first floor was dotted with uneven floor boards, peeling paint, and disrepair everywhere they looked. "Mary, I was told that you have limited funds to work with and the rent is only \$11.00 a month.

Mary looked the place over carefully. "Well it'll smell a whole lot better once I've had the chance to scrub it. Mr. Williams...this is perfect...I'll take it!

Mary was grinning ear to ear. Mr. Williams also broke out in a smile, partly because Mary's smile was contagious but mostly because this broken down house was finally off his books. "So Mary, when will you and your husband be moving in?" My husband lives and works up in Georgia. I'm not interested in living here but rather I'm going to open a school in this house and if I'm going to offer classes this fall I'll have to open in one week."

JW: "You won't be able to open a school here in a week. It'll take you months to get this place fixed up."

MMB: "One week will have to do because it's all I have."

JW: "Well, what you do with the building is your business as long as I get my rent every month."

MMB: "About that! I don't have the money right now but if you'll let me use the building I will have the money for you in a week when the school opens."

JW: "Well since it's been sitting empty for a year, I guess I could settle for half now and the other half next week."

MMB: "I'm sorry Mr. Williams, I don't have \$5.50 now but I will give you the entire \$11.00 next week."

JW: “So you don’t have the \$11.00 or even the \$5.50. What do you have to be able to raise the \$11.00 by next week?”

MMB: “I have a bushel of sweet potatoes!”

JW: “A bushel of sweet potatoes...lady you can’t open a school with a bushel of sweet potatoes...that won’t possibly be enough.”

MMB: “Well, a bushel of sweet potatoes will have to do...because it’s all I have.”

John Williams agreed to wait a week for his rent. In the meantime, Mary set to work cutting firewood, cleaning and repairing the house and most importantly turned that bushel of sweet potatoes into delicious sweet potato pies which she sold to the men working nearby on the Florida East Coast railroad.

On Oct. 3, 1904 the Daytona Literary and Industrial School for Training Negro Girls opened to an enrollment of five young ladies. Mary worked hard to give the girls the best education possible. Against all odds including threats and intimidation Mary never wavered and in just two years enrollment had grown to over 250 students.

In need of a bigger space, Mary contacted her favorite real estate agent, John Williams again. This time Mary wanted to buy a piece of property. After looking at various plots of land for sale they drove by the town dump.

Mary carefully looked over the land where the dump was located and proudly proclaimed to Mr. Williams, "This is it!" "Are you sure, Mary? Yes absolutely sure." Offer the owners \$30.00 for it. \$30.00? I don't think that will satisfy the owners. They're asking for at least twice that much. Well \$30.00 will have to be enough because it's all I have.

On that sight in 1923 the Daytona Literary and Industrial School for Training Negro Girls merged with a similar school for boys. Out of that merger was born Bethune-Cookman College with Mary McLeod Bethune as its first president. Mary McLeod-Bethune would become one of the most respected and beloved women in America.

Side note: When FDR died in office his funeral was a magnificent affair of state. Beside his grave there were four chairs reserved for special mourners. One was for FDR's wife Eleanor, one for Harry Truman, who now was president, one for the prime minister of Great Britain to honor our closest ally in WWII and in the fourth chair sat Mary McLeod Bethune as a representative of all the American people.

I love this story because it's so powerful in so many ways:

First, I love this story because it's a vivid example of what Pastor Gina preached about last week. Mary went from Georgia to Florida at the prompting of the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit moved in Mary's life she

followed. She rose to the occasion, and against all odds, and with the Spirit's help impacted the lives of so many.

Secondly, I love the fact that Mary didn't let her lack of resources keep her from moving forward. She didn't let what she couldn't do keep her from doing what she could. She had a bushel of sweet potatoes, but she also had God and the Holy Spirit. Over and over again we hear Mary say, when faced with what some might believe to be insurmountable obstacles: "it'll have to be enough because it's all I have." The story of Mary McLeod-Bethune mirrors well the story of the widows' mites that we read this morning. Jesus says to his disciples..."did you see that woman there? While everyone else was putting in amounts of money that they'll never miss, she gave everything she had." To which we can say, "did you see what Mary McLeod Bethune did down in Daytona, Florida? She put in everything she had and because she held nothing back God blessed her offering beyond measure.

And that brings me to the third thing I love about this story: When we offer God everything we have, including our time, talent, and treasure...but also our mind, and our heart, and our strength, our energy, our commitment, our perseverance; God takes our offerings and use them to do great things and small things, uses them to change lives; others and ours, and uses them to

create an example of the power of the Gift of Generosity for others to follow.

And finally, I love this story because we get to see the results. Mary's gift of generosity led to the creation of one of the finest institutes of higher learning in the country. An institution that has educated and trained doctors, nurses, healthcare professionals, teachers, civic leaders, etc., etc.

And that work continues at Bethune-Cookman College even to this day.

Last week Pastor Gina called each and everyone of us to rise to the occasion and challenged us specifically in the area of giving our treasure to God's work through the ministries of First Methodist Moorestown. And it's been exciting to hear as many have begun to rise to the occasion and give beyond their regular offerings.

This week's story of the widow's mite and Mary McLeod Bethune broadens that conversation reminding us that each and everyone of us has something or somethings to offer to God. Maybe it's two small coins...maybe it's a bushel of sweet potatoes, maybe its an idea, maybe its a prayer, an hour, or some measure of treasure...whatever it is...when offered to God at the prompting of the Holy Spirit it will help us rise to the occasion and be, in our own way, the hands and feet of God.

When the Spirit moves we follow and what follows after that is:

A flourishing and robust church of Jesus Christ where:

children, youth, and young people can encounter Christ and encounter community and grow in their faith.

families can find something for everyone and a place for them to grow individually and together as a family.

people of all ages can learn, worship, and fellowship with God and others.

people come together with others to reach out to the community and the world with the good news of Jesus Christ and with the basic necessities of life.

people who are scared, hurting, and confused can find a place of welcome and safety.

a church family that Loves God, Reaches People, and Serves All.

Do you hear what's at stake?

I was talking to a colleague friend of mine about how hard it is to live in the tension between a growing, spirit-filled ministry and financial struggles and he reminded me of something I don't always think about. He said, "there are evil powers in this world that don't want you to succeed. That don't want the church to be relevant; don't want it to be an island of hope, don't want people to find a place of meaning; don't want the church to be the body of Christ."

If that's the case then let's make things very clear for us and for those

"forces" that work against us:

those evil forces have no power here.

despair, discouragement, and discontent have no power here.

there is nothing to fear if we keep the faith.

we are stronger than any other force if we rely on God's Holy Spirit, and keep our commitment to Christ and His church.

"Now, someone bring me a bushel of sweet potatoes and let's get going!"