

18 November 2018

Donors and Givers

Mark 12:41-44

We read today a familiar story from the Gospel of Mark, traditionally called “The Widow’s Mite.” We read Mark 12, verses 41-44:

⁴¹ [Jesus] sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴² A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³ Then he called his disciples and said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴⁴ For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.’

This is a familiar story, but what many people don’t realize is that it is incomplete. Just recently, in an earthen vase in the Judean desert, an ancient scroll was discovered that completes this narrative. We pick up immediately after Jesus says, “but she has put in all she had to live on.”

Then Peter did look at James and say, “Did our Lord, in truth, say that those two coppers were worth more than all the rich men’s offerings?”

“Truly, it sounded like it. But such a thing cannot be. Two coppers are worth, well, only two coppers.”

Peter agreed. “It is hard to buy much food or finance a church with two coppers. Perhaps it is another parable. I hate those.”

The Lord, knowing what they were saying to each other, said, “I meant what I said. That woman gave in the right way, which matters more than how much was given.” Then he walked on.

Upon this word, James did look at Peter and say, “Do you ever wonder if he got kicked in the head by a donkey in that stable?”

Then another disciple joined them and said unto them, “Let not your hearts be troubled by this saying, for I know what to do. Just read the story of this widow every year as a pious example, and then pretend it doesn’t exist the rest of the time.”

The other disciples all agreed that Judas spoke rightly and have followed his advice since that day.

Okay, so I invented the continuation of the story, but it might as well be true. After all, the clear implication of Jesus’ words is that in God’s eyes, generosity is measured by the heart of the giver and has nothing to do with how much is given. But that is absolutely not the way that we act, is it? When we say “generous gift,” we don’t mean a small gift that was a deep sacrifice for the one who gave it; we mean a gift with lots of zeros at the end. In other words, just as in my imaginary dialogue, we read the story of the Widow’s Mite at least once a year and then practice the exact opposite, honoring the large gifts of those who can easily afford them far more than we honor the small gifts of people who have little to spare.

There’s a question that we in the church would do well to ask more often: “What would happen if we took Jesus seriously?” In this case, what would happen if we took seriously the idea

that what matters in giving is not the amount, but the motivation behind the gift? What if we talked about giving not as a thing that we should do for the sake of the church, but rather as something we do as a natural expression of growing faith? What if giving was not about the church's budgetary needs, but rather was just one element growing up in God? How would that change the way, for instance, I preach stewardship sermons? Well, the way to teach discipleship is by example, so these sermons might involve less begging and more story-telling.

So let me tell you the story of my growth in giving. I was raised by devout Christian parents who taught tithing – giving ten percent of one's income to the church. I received a weekly allowance, and it was given on Sunday morning, to make it easier for me to take ten percent right to church. When I got fifty cents a week, a nickel went in the offering plate. As I got older, my parents increased my allowance, but no matter how much I got, the tithe was to be set aside first. I learned that Old Testament law well, so when I went to college and got various part-time jobs, I tithed almost automatically. Of course, it was never a sacrifice. As a child, my needs were met, and in college my tuition and room and board were paid for – young people, this was many years ago, in a distant time when college was affordable – so I was tithing my spending money not money that I needed for basics. Still, I did I did it.

Fast forward about fifteen years. By this time I'd married, had two or three kids (How many are there again?) and gotten a couple of seminary degrees. Things had gotten a bit tighter financially, but I married a nurse who made good money, so we hadn't ever been desperate, and I still gave around ten percent to our church. I graduated and got a one-year university teaching contract, and we moved into a new life stage: adults no longer in school. Then my contract ended and was not renewed. Then Rebecca's nursing agency laid off half its staff, and we were suddenly poor for the first time. I got part-time work as a landscaper, and Rebecca picked up some reduced hours at her old job, but we had no health insurance and weren't sure if we could make rent or pay for food month by month. I stopped giving to the church. How could I justify giving away money that might be necessary to pay for the next child's ear infection, or grocery trip?

It was a hard time, involving tears and anger and nights lying awake feeling like a failure, but one decision I did make during that time. After a few months, I decided that I was going to start giving to the church again, somehow, at least something. Not because the big church we were attending then needed my pittance, but because I found that I was not the person I wanted to be when I didn't give. So I gave \$50 a month, maybe three percent of our income, and there wasn't a month when it didn't hurt to write that check.

Well, we came through that time, and today we're all right. I no longer worry so much about "the tithe," as a law to follow, but I still basically aim at that. To give that much requires me to give up some other things I might have spent money on, which makes my gift mean more. Currently, I give about \$700 a month, by electronic transfer, with another \$50 designated for the bell tower. Measuring that purely by dollar signs, that makes me one of the most "generous" twenty or so givers to the church. But I know better. That's not generosity. Generosity was when we didn't have enough, and I gave a little bit *anyway*.

That's my giving story. I don't expect anyone else's to be like it, but I tell it to show how learning generosity is a process. Generosity is not measured by amounts, but within each person's heart. I was given good teaching as a child – legalistic, true, but that works for a child. But I didn't really learn giving until it was no longer easy. That was when giving became a part of who I am. So that's how I want to end today: asking you about your process. Where are you?

Here's a normal process today for people in the church. Many, especially new members, don't give at all, and for a while at least, I affirm that. As I said last week, no one should give money to a church until (1) they are sure that they agree with that church's purpose and (2) they are sure that money given to that church will be used responsibly *for* that purpose. That's on us. We need to be worth supporting before we ask for support. After that, there are others who have decided that the church is worth supporting and give whatever they have to spare. As people grow more connected to the church and its mission they take more ownership and want to give "my fair share." This is regular giving, but is primarily from a sense of duty. I am receiving something I value from the church, and I'm a part of its work; I should help support it financially. Beyond this, though, there are others who give out of gratitude, which is deeper than duty. At this stage it's no longer about supporting the church so much as it is about thanking God *for* the church. And finally there are those who are committed at a deep level to the church and who are going to give regularly and generously as a part of their larger commitment to giving God their time, their talents, and their ministry. For these people, giving money is not "what I do for the church" but rather is a natural outgrowth of all the other things that they do with and through and for the church. In general, these are typical steps for growing in generosity. The point for each of us, then, is to see where we are and ask if we are ready for the next step. But, again, it's not about how much we give. We are not looking to attract donors; we are looking to grow givers.

A few years ago, when we were in Wausau, Rebecca started a new program through the United Way, called Project Step Up. What this program did was take low income families, pair them with mentors, provide them with training, and basically teach them the rules of financial management. They learned how to budget, how to shop wisely, how to save. They learned how to open bank accounts, because some of them had never had such a thing, nor had their parents or grandparents, with the result that banks felt like mysterious and sinister forces. So Rebecca and her mentors taught people to be smarter with money.

Here's the interesting thing that happened. Once people learned these basic tools and started to get control of their financial lives – once they experienced that strange feeling of having money building up in a bank account – they began wanting to take control of other areas of their lives as well. So Rebecca began offering parenting and cooking classes and things like that. You see, we are whole people. When one area of our lives feels out of control, that sends other things into a spiral, but when we start to grow and mature in one area of our lives, that growth also begins to spread. Well, as a church it is our goal for every person here to grow in faith and wisdom and compassion and generosity and connection to God. That's why we're here. It doesn't really matter where you start, or where you are growing now, because growth will beget growth.

But one measurable area for growth is in generosity. Wherever you are in your giving, I challenge you to see if you can grow. The pledge cards I sent out a couple of weeks ago – and that are in the pews today – have a sort of stair step pattern to physically represent growth. We will collect those at the end of the service, at each door, with gratitude, because every pledge card represents your faith not only in God but in this church's faithfulness to that God. And every card represents a different story of a different journey.

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A final word: I was at a church-sponsored stewardship conference last month, learning rules for asking people for money. I want you to know that today's giving sermon broke most of those

rules. Those sessions were mostly about how to attract large sums, but that's not our purpose as a church. We're not opposed to large sums, mind you, but that's not the point. The point is for each of us to be growing toward God, in every way, within our own unique context. When Jesus said that the widow's sacrificial two coppers were worth more than riches, I think he actually meant it.