

To Give All We Have

The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

1 Kings 17:8-16; Psalm 146;
Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Veteran's Day. Is it just another holiday? Or does it have a profound significance, not only for our understanding of the freedoms we enjoy, but also the way we live for our Lord? To put it another way, do we live for our Lord the way our Veterans have lived for our country? Of course, after hearing this morning's gospel, our response may well be to think of our service to God solely in terms of the amount of money we give in our offering.

That was the thinking of a young man from Scotland who was visiting not long ago in central Pennsylvania. He was attending a worship service on a Sunday morning in one of our small central Pennsylvania churches. He was wrestling with himself as to how much American money he should put in the plate. He finally settled on five dollars. Much to his consternation a little later in the service, he realized that what he had actually done was to put fifty dollars in the plate, not a five. "Well, no matter", he thought, "I'll just exchange the fifty for a five after the service. After all this is a strange country, I'm a visitor here, their money is crazy, it's all the same size and the same color, why anybody could be forgiven for getting mixed up and making such a mistake.

So when the service ended, he went to the head usher (who, for purposes of this sermon, will remain anonymous) and explained the situation and asked for his fifty dollars back. "No way," was the head usher's reply, "it's the Lord's now that it's been put on God's altar." Slightly stunned, the Scotsman tried to regain his composure and mumbled, "At least I'll get a fifty dollar credit in heaven." "No you won't," said the usher, "five dollars is what you meant to give, and five dollars is what you get. The rest is gravy for the Lord!"

The Scotsman's giving bears little resemblance to that of the poor widow in the temple that Jesus was watching. You see, the Temple was so constructed that, upon entering, one found oneself in the Court of the Gentiles; next, came the Court of the Women; and between the two was the treasury where were placed thirteen alms boxes, each box with a large metal trumpet-like affair attached to them to catch the money (something like the horn speaker on an old gramophone, or perhaps like the baskets on a toll road where you toss your coins as you drive through the toll gate). Jesus was watching as people gave their offerings for the upkeep of the Temple and those who received their living from it. And he noticed something that seemed to escape everybody else, a poor widow woman giving the two smallest coins of the currency at the time. She had given, it would seem, all that she had. Surely she could have kept one for herself and made some sort of meager provision. But no, she didn't hold back, she gave both her coins to the treasury.

Traditionally, this has been understood to be a lesson in giving money to God through the church, what we euphemistically call these days, “giving of treasure”. But Jesus’ observation has a particular sting to it when he points out that her gift, insignificant as it was, was far greater than the combined value of everything that had been given by everyone else that day. It is an easy step then, for preachers like me, to put the guilt squeeze on you about maybe sending back your pledge form by calling you to be great financial contributors to the church and to God. But is that what Jesus was really getting at? Or is there a much more subtle and troubling message in the words of Mark’s gospel as we heard it read this morning?

First, notice where Mark places this account – it’s right at the end of Jesus’ ministry, after His triumphal entry into Jerusalem for the last time, and immediately before He tells the disciples the Temple will be thrown down, wrecked, destroyed; there will no longer be one stone upon another! In the midst of that, how then is the poor widow’s offering to be understood? She has just given everything for the upkeep of the building and the people who staffed it. Yet, Jesus says, the whole thing, in a few days, will lie in ruins. Is the poor woman’s giving misplaced, wasted?

But is what Jesus is drawing attention to, her misplaced generosity? Or, is He comparing the amount and worth of her offering with the offering of the wealthier givers? Or is He making a much more terrible point, instead? Could it be that Jesus has noticed this woman’s giving as having something to do with the teachings and the actions and the behaviors of the Scribes, and her needing to meet an obligation imposed by them upon her in the name of the Lord?

What is it Jesus has accused them of? “They like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

They devour widow’s houses. They take the last of what the poor widow has to offer, right down to the last mite! And so, our poor widow surrenders her entire estate to the very institution that was supposed to protect her and support her. That, says Jesus, is their ruin. That is their downfall. That is their condemnation.

Second, when, when you get home, take the time to read the 11th, 12th, and 13th chapters of the Gospel of Mark. You will find that before Jesus observes the widows sacrifice, he has been challenged to by the Pharisees; He has told the story of the wicked tenants in the vineyard; He’s been tested in regard to paying taxes; He’s been challenged about marriage in this world and the next; and finally He is asked which is first commandment of all, to which He replies, right before He observes the widow,

The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰ you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' ³¹ The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these

Here’s what I think Jesus is getting at. He’s getting at the true and faithful response to all that God has done. Remember the commandments are a response to God setting the people free from slavery and

bondage in Egypt, and we're called to respond to God for what He's done for us simply by giving Him our all. If we love God with all we have, and if we love our neighbor as ourselves, then surely the widow's gift of her two mites models such holy and thankful living. To live any other way, it seems, is to court disaster.

I'm reminded on an old poem which goes like this.

Six humans trapped by happenstance in dark and bitter cold,
each possessed a stick of wood, or so the story's told.
Their dying fire in need of logs, the first woman held hers tight,
for one face around the fire was one for whom she felt spite.
The next man looking 'cross the way saw one not of his church,
and couldn't bring himself to give the fire his stick of birch.
The third one sat in tattered clothes; he gave his coat a hitch.
Why should his log be put to use, to warm the idle rich?
The rich man just sat back and thought of the wealth he had in store,
and how to keep what he had earned from the lazy, shiftless poor.
The next man's face bespoke his greed, as the fire passed from his sight,
for what he saw in his stick of wood he would need for himself the next night.
And the last man of this forlorn group did naught except for gain:
giving only to those who gave, was how he played the game.
The logs held tight in death's stilled hands, were proof of human sin.
They didn't die from the cold without, they died from the cold within.

Our poor widow in the Temple held nothing back for herself, she gave all she had, and that without reluctance or complaint. Jesus is not lauding the purse-emptying donation the poor widow makes, but rather is appalled by what she has done in comparison with the response of others around her. In just the same way as we are appalled at the fate of the six humans who freeze to death for want of giving their stick to keep the fire going by which all of them might have been kept warm.

Then Jesus simply notes that while some giving that day gave very large amounts, they still have an abundance. The poor widow, on the other hand, after her gift, has nothing. Nothing, that is, except complete trust in God. What God asks of us is a whole-life response. Just as Jesus was to offer Himself on the cross in a few days time contributing his life's blood and breath for the sake of a sinful, broken world, and for the sake of you and me, my brothers and sisters.

So Mark's account makes a perfect transition from reporting Jesus' ministry to recounting His Passion. There Jesus gave not only His living, but His life, that you and I might come to this table, humbled by the impact of this morning's gospel, and knowing ourselves cherished, beloved, and forgiven, nonetheless. Invited, empowered and enabled, to give all that we are and all that we have for the sake of Christ, not in an offering plate, but in our daily living in the world.

Such an understanding might look something like this. A missionary from India told about an army officer who stopped in the street one day to have his shoes polished by a poor Indian boy. The lad launched into his task with such enthusiasm and vigor that the man was utterly amazed. Instead of an

ordinary, slipshod performance with an all-too-eager outstretched hand for a tip, the boy worked diligently until the leather sparkled with a brilliant luster. The officer asked, "Why are you taking so much time to polish my boots?" "Well, sir," was the reply, "I belong to Jesus. Every time I shine somebody's shoes, I keep thinking they're shoes that belong to Jesus, so I do the very best I can. At the very least I can give Him back."

Our gifts to God, like the widow's, grow out of our response to what God has done for us. It is important we understand that our discipleship is not an attempt to buy off God or even to please Him. Discipleship grows out of a keen awareness of our connection to the Lord of life. Christ has given himself for us. He loves us as we are, and He loves us even when we cannot love ourselves. Out of our response to that love we bring our tithes and offerings to sustain God's work in the world. Our giving simply reflects the importance of God's grace in our lives. It's a reflection of the condition and warmth of our inner selves.

Yesterday was Veteran's Day. Part of the National Celebration included the dedication and opening of the Marine Museum. At that ceremony, President Bush announced the posthumous award of the Medal of Honor to Marine Corporal Jason Dunham, of New York. While wrestling with an Iraqi insurgent, Corporal Dunham noticed a grenade fall from his combatant's hand. Calling to warn his comrades, he took off his helmet, put it over the grenade, and laid on top of his helmet before the grenade exploded.

Like a poor widow so many ages before, Jason Dunham gave all that he had.

Amen.