

TOGETHER WE GROW INTO EXTRAVAGANT GENEROSITY; MARK 12:38-44; DEDICATION SUNDAY; NOVEMBER 22, 2009; THY, WPC

You are all to be commended! Here you are. We've been very clear. We've said this Sunday is about dedicating our gifts. We've said we're going to take that extraordinarily private act of filling out our pledge cards and do it together, in public worship.

Most folks usually don't like mixing money and religion. Maybe you're holding on to your hat this morning, saying, "I know we have to do this once each year, I'll be a good sport." Or maybe some of you are bracing yourselves like you do in the dentist's chair when the whir of the drill starts.

Somewhere we were told religion is 'spiritual' and money is 'material' and never the twain shall meet. So we tiptoe around the subject, trying not to offend others or embarrass anyone by bringing it up in church.

Not to mention the reading. Maybe you said when you heard the story 'couldn't he have chosen something less clear? Something with several levels of meaning where it doesn't say what we think it says.' But Mark Twain himself confessed, "It's not what I don't get in the Bible that troubles me, it's what I do get." This is one of those texts we "get."

The only ambiguous thing in the older version of the story is the term 'm-i-t-e' referring to ancient coinage but which not a few children have interpreted as 'm-i-g-h-t' which makes its own little point today. The widow was mighty wasn't she!

But I suspect we're feeling anxious not because of the combination of the spiritual and material as much as the fact that we're so attached to the material. And we don't want Jesus or anyone else separating us from it.¹

It's not surprising, therefore, in an article entitled, "Does God want you to be rich?" that *Time Magazine* observed the relative absence of sermons about money—a subject the Bible mentions several thousand times, more than any other topic including salvation.

Like those doctors in Maine who participated in a twenty year study about what factors determined which procedures they prescribed—they were willing to talk about anything but money, personal income and its affect on their practice.

Silence on the matter of money, in most American churches, is a stunning omission of clergy and lay leaders, especially among middle and upper middle class congregations.

Televangelists are not bashful preaching "a God who loves you doesn't want you to be broke." But that rings hollow next to Jesus' advice that "those who want to save their life will lose it. And those who lose their life for his sake and the gospel will save it."

Maybe we need more sermons about material things. *The Chicago Tribune* reported recently there are 55,000 self-storage facilities in the nation. That's 6.9 square feet of rented storage space for every man, woman and child in America.

“We seem to be living with a single expectation,” says Wendell Berry, “that there should and will always be more of everything, including ‘life expectancy.’ This insatiable desire for more is the result of an overwhelming sense of incompleteness, which is the result of the insatiable desire for more: the wheel of death.ⁱⁱ And life passes us by.

So I propose we talk a bit this morning about giving. Not to make us uncomfortable but because, and here’s the bottom line for everything I am saying today: the resurrection of Jesus Christ frees us to do more with our lives than protect them. It frees us to offer them.

This is the core of the issue: do we devote ourselves to accumulation or to giving. Churchill said, “We make a living by what we get but a life by what we give.” Those who’ve given of themselves are the shoulders we stand on as the British Prime Minister knew so well.

Indeed, a history of such giving is the foundation for every church in the land. The original commonly accepted formula was the tithe. The biblical principle that since all things come from God, all things belong to God. God claims only 10% for God’s work leaving 90% for God’s people.

Tithing funded medical care, schools, provisions for the sick, the afflicted, the orphaned and widowed and others unable to care for themselves in a male dominated culture.

Tithing is a reasonable economic system of mutual responsibility which perhaps Congress would do well to contemplate before the coming debates on health care.

But I’d like to narrow our focus by considering the widow in today’s story. I probably haven’t said anything so far that you would disagree with, except maybe the health care comment. But when we meet this widow we learn something more profound than our discomfort with money and church, or how much we like stuff, or the history of tithing.

What we see in the widow is how to enter the Kingdom of God. The story comes at the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry. The next thing is the series of events leading to his death.

So you might say Mark uses this poor widow, the least of human beings in first century culture, to make the most important point of his Gospel; and it is Jesus’ own sacrifice in the days ahead that embody the widow’s act of giving.

What Jesus was saying in every village, synagogue and marketplace was that the Kingdom of God was coming. And they all knew what he meant by kingdom. They lived in the most powerful kingdom on earth. But Caesar’s kingdom was about power, domination and exploitation. Caesar’s kingdom required armies and death and bleeding of occupied nations.

Whereas God’s kingdom was different. In God’s Kingdom the standards were remarkably high, no less than perfection; but you were admitted to the kingdom not on the basis of achieving perfection but on the basis of your attitude of mind and spirit of heart.

This kingdom was not something you had to build or make. This kingdom was simply the life God was already waiting to give to you.

The way to enter it was to accept God's rule rather than being your own ruler, or being ruled by the dictates of the world to be popular or thin or rich. Those who inhabit the Kingdom of God know their lives are precious to their Creator and are protected by Her sovereignty. Come what may God will see everything through – from the cosmos to your life and my life within it. See us through to peace, to completion, to fulfillment. And so those who seek the Kingdom of God are released from fear; they stare death in the eye and rather than despair say, "L'Kiam!" To life!

Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of God, not surprisingly, threatened those for whom it seemed to require too much like the rich young ruler.

But to Jesus and to those who longed for God's reign, the Kingdom was the most important thing in the world – a pearl of great price, a treasure buried in a field which a man will give anything to own.

Above all it was at hand. In fact, he said on occasion, God's reign had already arrived in their hearing of his words. But it was not yet fully established he was quick to say, so he cautioned them to be alert for we dare not miss it when it comes and be left like the six virgins whose lamps were without oil and stood in the darkness. All we need, he said, was to accept this Kingdom in our hearts. It is no wonder they heard him gladly.ⁱⁱⁱ

What is the widow's connection to the Kingdom? It is she who, one last time, before the coming events of Holy Week, and the cataclysmic months and years ahead, it is she who shows us the key to God's Kingdom and places it in our hands.

Her earthly security and protection gone – with no father, husband or son in her life – she had fewer rights than a male child and less freedom than a female child. The remarkable thing Jesus did was to take people like her on the outside, the margins of society and culture and social and economic security and use them to drive home the central point of the gospel; to convey with crystal clarity what he wants you and me not only to understand but to do.

If she, a poor widow, can do so much with so little, what more can be expected of you and me who have so much? This is the point today that cannot be evaded or ignored. Jesus is not concerned with levels of giving as institutions like to say, but with where we place our ultimate trust and how we express that trust in our daily lives.

This woman decided she was not going to let her poverty define or limit her but instead used her generosity to express her confidence in God's will and gratitude for God's reign.

She who received all was going to give all and in so doing reveals the key to God's kingdom – gratitude disproportionate to her means.^{iv}

In this way her act is extravagant – which Webster defines as "exceeding the limits of reason or necessity; going beyond what is justifiable; lacking in moderation, balance or restraint." And so she mirrors and models the extravagant love of God for his creatures and creation.

The key to the Kingdom she hands us is her example of extravagant love for God and utter trust in God's reign.

Her act of giving opens the door to God's reign in our own lives and beckons the rest of us, rich and not rich, to consider just what we could be doing with our money, and what our relationship between our money and our faith might look like.

If money talks, what does our management of it say about us^v and about where we place our ultimate trust and security?

At their best churches over the centuries have embodied the widow's example; have used her key to the Kingdom to open the door to new life; have poured themselves out in extravagance.

The church, the Kingdom of God on earth, is where people say yes to God and to one another. It is where Christ turns our water into wine. The church is where people come to die and rise again in new life.^{vi}

How can a church, how can a person survive who keeps pouring themselves out into the world? That is a question for which I do not have an answer. But if you asked them – the ones who pour themselves out – they'd tell you it is freedom from the fear of not having enough or not being enough that keeps them giving themselves away.

As one wise elder said, "those who are willing to give themselves away are the ones with anything worth keeping; the ones with abundant life."

The underlying truth – grounded in the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth – is that any body of believers, any church, whose faith is funded by a giving God will find their lives by giving too.^{vii} Amen.

ⁱ I am indebted to Peter J. Gomes and his sermon "Surplus and Substance" in *Strength for the Journey: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 2003).

ⁱⁱ John Buchanan, "Stuff," *The Christian Century*, October 31, 2006.

ⁱⁱⁱ Theodore Parker Ferris, *The Story of Jesus*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953).

^{iv} Gomes.

^v Gomes.

^{vi} Barbara Brown Taylor, "Faith Matters," *The Christian Century*, May 29, 2007, 35.

^{vii} Taylor.