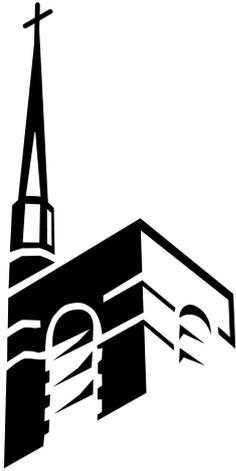


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Uniquely Blessed:
“HAVING SO MUCH TO SHARE!”

Rev. Gary Haller
First United Methodist Church
Birmingham, Michigan
Scripture: Mark 12:38-44

As he taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who 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.”

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 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. 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.” (Mark 12:38-44)

From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded. (Luke 12:48b)

Once upon a time I used to see movies in the theater. Now I’m lucky to catch them on TV, so when I saw a television listing for a great movie that I first saw in a theater years back, I made sure to watch it. It’s a movie about human sacrifice and commitment, yet in the end it’s really a movie about stewardship. It was not produced by any denominational stewardship office, nor by a religious fund-raising organization. This stewardship film was produced in Hollywood by Steven Spielberg, and its title is *Saving Private Ryan*.

I have thought a great deal about *Saving Private Ryan*. In the days after the Normandy invasion, June 6, 1944, the War Department discovered that three of the four sons of a single Iowa family had already died. The fourth son, Private Ryan, was somewhere in France. General George Marshall, on hearing about the situation, decides that the fourth son will be located and brought back to the United States, to safety and to his family. What is his life worth? “Whatever it takes!” General Marshall decides. Private Ryan, meanwhile, is somewhere behind enemy lines, having been dropped in an airborne assault which went badly awry, so no one knows exactly where he is.

A squad of GIs are assigned the task of locating Ryan and bringing him out, led by a captain played by Tom Hanks. The mission is very costly. At the end, many of the GIs have given their lives for this mission. Private Ryan is found and his life is saved, and he comes upon the captain who has pursued him across Europe in order to save him. Now lying mortally wounded, in civilian life he is a high school English teacher, a father and husband. And Tom Hanks, this dying captain, says his final words to Private Ryan: "Earn this." And at the beginning of this movie, there is the scene where Private Ryan is kneeling at this captain's grave, fifty years later, praying that his life has been worthy of the sacrifices made for him.

"Earn this!" The captain was saying, "You have been given a very precious gift. How will you use it? Your life has been bought at a price. Others have died so that you might live. You didn't deserve this. But you can live your life in gratitude for it." And so it is for us: if we are grateful for what has been done for us, we can show it with our lives.

This is a fundamental lesson in stewardship. Now let's be clear: we can never earn God's grace. Never. We can never earn what Jesus Christ has done for us. We do not live good lives in order to earn a reward.

But we can seek to be worthy. We can live good lives in deep gratitude for the gift of life that has been given to us. We can seek to share our deep joy with others who need the grace we have received.

And so we have the story of Jesus and the widow who gives all she has. I am resisting the temptation to make this a sermon just about tithing. Because see this: the widow in this story is not tithing. She is 100 percent-ing. She gives everything she has in gratitude for something on which she stakes her very life. And Jesus honors her. Jesus contrasts her with the priests and rulers who are wealthy, who love the spotlight, who tip God for public credit. And no doubt his disciples, outback country bumpkins from the Galilee, are impressed by the great show of wealth. But this widow, who is ignored by everyone, is the real model of honoring God.

The widow's sacrifice ought to humble us as it did Jesus the day he stood in the Temple watching people bring their offerings. And we should remember that this encounter happened just days before Jesus was betrayed, condemned and crucified, giving his life, his all, for us on a cross. History is full of examples of those who gave their all. But I'm especially haunted by this widow and her heartfelt offering that Jesus points out to us, just as I am haunted by the captain who gave his all in *Saving Private Ryan*. What does it take for one to give everything?

I know what it takes for me: it takes great belief and it takes great gratitude. Apart from those foundations, I would not be able to give God my life to the fullest. What there is of me, I offer entirely to God. And I do it because I am so full of gratitude for all God has done to change my life. And I am full of gratitude because of the lives I see touched, renewed and changed at Birmingham First United Methodist because of the commitment and love of those of you who are here.

Birmingham First is a great blessing to others. That was the first impression Laurie and I had of this church, and it will be the lasting impression. Many of you are fresh off of what you did in

the UMW Rummage Sale a week ago. We were amazed. Equally amazing was our experience of Friday Night Lights, and the great children and youth choirs here, all of your small groups, Bible studies, GRIP Groups, fellowship groups. Even now, we're still working in welcoming events with groups that have invited us to attend.

We're excited about the growth in the Preschool program because it's a such a great introduction for young families to our church. We've learned about hungry?, StreeThreads, Art & Soul, SOS, Hands 4 Detroit, Cass Community, Brightmoor, Rivertown Assisted Living, and Chelsea Retirement Home. Not many churches can offer "Cathedral worship" in the sanctuary and Contemporary worship in the same facility. How great a blessing.

And I know: whenever I mention one ministry, I know there are so many others I neglect to list. So forgive me. The ministry here is beyond itemizing.

You have been uniquely blessed. What I hope for our church is that we would all be intensely aware of how we are called to bless and serve others. First Church is a faithful community. So please do not take yourselves for granted. Don't take for granted the impact you have on the lives of others. God has blessed you. And you are meant to be a blessing for others. For of those to whom much is given, much is expected. We have been blessed – in order to be a blessing.

Okay. Time for a deep cleansing breath. Everybody, please breathe with me. Inhale! Draw it in deep. Exhale! Let it out slow. Stay calm; I'm now going to talk about money. Only it's not about money, really. It's about mission. It's about vision. It's about being truly free.

You see, Jesus had a lot to say about money and possessions. By some accounts, over 60% of his teachings touch on money and possessions and on "being rich toward God." This is very awkward for a preacher because we don't like to talk a lot about money on Sunday mornings. But Jesus wasn't gimmicky. He didn't take up a collection to build a religious theme park or promise to send you a book of his sermons or declare that God was going to "take him home" if he didn't raise enough money for a tower, as one evangelist famously declared. What Jesus focused on was the hold that money has on people's hearts, all the worry and anxiety we put into it, and how sensitive we are when it's mentioned. But I don't like to talk about money on Sunday in worship. I've always believed God will provide what is needed when people respond out of deep gratitude. So I simply try to teach stewardship from what Jesus taught us.

There are other ways to do stewardship. There's a Baptist church in Dallas that one Sunday a year—without warning—locks its doors and keeps collecting pledges until they have their budget subscribed. One of my high school friends is Jewish and he tells me that his synagogue sends out annual member assessments based on your income tax return, and if you don't pay your assessment, you don't get a seat in the synagogue on high holy days. So the Rabbi never needs to talk about money. You show your tax return, you pay your share—or you worship in your car. Well, we don't send out member assessments. We don't tell you what your share of the energy bill was last month. We wouldn't even keep records if they weren't necessary for the IRS. What you give is between you and God.

Now, don't forget to breathe. Inhale again, and let God breathe into you as well. You and I have made a covenant to be church together in this place. That means we are bound to one another in supporting what we decide God wants us to do. For those of you who are members here, you came here willingly; nobody forced you to join. You know, there are only two people who were made to come here: Laurie and me. A Bishop sent us here. Chad and Lindsey applied; we didn't. But we all love and support this church. This year, even though we're complete "newbies," Laurie and I will take a tithe right off the top of all our income for Christ's work through the church. Any other giving is on top of that. I am not asking you today to start tithing if that's too intimidating to consider. I do ask that you be prayerful—that you involve God in your decision—and that you be grateful and joyful.

But, if it's between you and God, remember who Jesus praised. The widow who gave from the meat of all she had. Now, if we tipped a waiter or waitress 10%, it would mean we weren't very happy. One of my daughters did a lot of waitressing and she gets furious with me if I don't tip 20%. But God doesn't ask for our tips or our brilliant ideas, for our spare time or spare change. God asks for all of our hearts. God asks for all of our lives. God asks for all of our love. God knows the rest will follow.

Many of you know about William Barclay, the renowned Bible scholar. A couple of years after World War II, Barclay was on a train returning to his home in Scotland. Two young men boarded the train and were seated in the compartment with Dr. Barclay. As the train pulled out of the station, one of the young men had a dramatic seizure. He fell to the floor with violent convulsions. He was in great pain. But his friend tenderly picked him up and helped him back to his seat and wiped away the beads of perspiration from his face. He placed a pillow behind his head and covered him with a blanket. Soon he was sound asleep. This compassionate friend turned to Dr. Barclay and said, "I'm so sorry. I had hoped this would not happen. He has these seizures about twice a month and he just had one a few days ago. We did not expect another one so soon."

Dr. Barclay responded by saying, "It's quite all right. You need not apologize. As a matter of fact, I was moved by the tender way you helped him. You are to be congratulated."

"Well," said the young man, "my buddy and I were in the Normandy invasion together. He is English and I am an American. We were both wounded. My leg was blown off. My friend had shrapnel wounds all across his chest. A hand grenade had blown away much of his chest and shoulder."

The young man paused a moment and then continued: "I don't know how in the world he did it, but somehow he got to his feet and dragged me to safety. I heard him cry out in agony each step of the way. I kept telling him to leave me behind and go on and save himself, but he told me, 'No way! If you die, I die with you. I'm not leaving you.' And finally he got us to the medic station."

The young American glanced over at his sleeping friend and then he said, "Two years ago I found out that he was having seizures. I'm single. I have no family. So I sold my house and my furniture, I quit my job in America, cashed in my savings, and came over here to take care of him

because he needs around-the-clock attention. It's all right now, because I am with him and I can help him and take care of him as long as he needs me."

William Barclay said: "My friend, you don't have to explain any more. That is one of the most beautiful and noble stories that I have ever heard in my life."

And the young American said: "But sir, you still don't understand. After what he did for me, there isn't anything I would not do for him."

Listen to that again: "After what he did for me, there isn't anything I would not do for him." I trust that's a truth with which you've wrestled? Are you and I able to say with gratitude, "Lord, after what you did for me, there isn't anything I would not do for you." We are invited to take our lives and, in gratitude, say "Lord, whatever you want me to be, I will be. Whatever you want me to do, I will do. Wherever you want me to go, I will go. I am your faithful and grateful servant as long as you need me."

Okay. Breathe again. Breathe deep. Breathe in the Spirit of the living God. What God promises will make you catch your breath. What God asks will, too. But that's the power of the widow's mite.

"Earn this!" the captain said. Your life has been bought at a very dear price. God is never content with one-tenth of our lives. God asks for nothing less than everything. I think about Private Ryan, kneeling in gratitude on that captain's grave, praying that his life was worth the sacrifice of so many. I think about the widow Jesus immortalized, bringing everything she had to the Temple because she loved her God.

Yet, the widow's life was her real gift, just as Private Ryan's life was the only gift he could offer to those who saved him. And our lives must be our gift, as well. What the Lord wants more than our money or our work or anything else we can give, is our heart. Any generosity within us must come from giving our heart in deepest gratitude to God.

When we bring our Estimates of Giving and our Offerings forward in just a few minutes, I pray our giving will spring out of our having given our hearts and lives in deep gratitude and joy to Jesus Christ, who praised a humble widow quietly giving her all. May we be ready, may we be willing to give God our highest and best for Christ today.

"Truly I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all the rest. For they contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living!" Thanks be to God.