

October 8, 2017



Living Out Love; Transforming Lives:
“AN EXTRAVAGANT GIFT”

Mark 12:38-44

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Well, friends, I have a confession to make this morning. It seems that I may have caused some division in the church last week. On Sunday evening I reported on Facebook the beautiful victory of the Adrian College Bulldogs over the Albion College Britons. It was a glorious win...by two points! Within minutes after posting my moment of Bulldog pride and forgetting that I had done so, I made a phone call to an Albion alum member of our congregation about an entirely different matter. It wasn't long before I realized that he had noticed the lack of pastoral care that my words provided for those Britons in our midst.

So how about that Michigan vs. Michigan State game last night? Perhaps the beginning of the stewardship campaign is not the time to be talking about such rivalries. I'm hoping that we'll all have moved on by the end of the campaign.

As I think of the scripture lesson this morning, it would be easy to rush right into this familiar story of the widow's mite. We know how the story ends. Jesus commends the poor widow who puts in two small copper coins; her gift was greater than all the rest because she gave God everything she had. Everyone else shared from their abundance, but she gave all that she had to live on. Often, we hear about her great faith in God. So is the message of the story that we should give God everything we own to show our great faith? It's perfect for the start of a stewardship campaign, isn't it? Yet, I wonder what else we might be missing from this story. What's at the heart of this story?

Let's step back from the story for a moment. Perhaps we need to zoom out into the context of the story this morning. I hope you don't mind a brief synopsis of the events surrounding this story so as to set the stage for us.

In the previous chapter, Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem on the back of a colt. Upon arriving at the Temple, he turns over the tables of the moneychangers who are taking advantage of the poor. Not long after that, he begins to teach in the Temple.

As a part of that teaching, Jesus tells a parable about a group of wicked tenants who kill the landlord's servants when they come to collect the landlord's fair share of their labors. Later, some Pharisees ask Jesus whether it is right to pay taxes. He takes a coin, and after pointing out

that the emperor's face was on the coin, he tells them to give to the emperor that which belongs to him and to give to God that which belongs to God.

Jesus also answers a scribe's question about the greatest commandment and teaches the growing crowds at the Temple the two great commandments, namely, "to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength" and "to love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus then begins to challenge the scribes' theology. Now he's preached about politics and religion!

As our lesson begins today, he moves on to talk about how the scribes "walk around in long robes," enjoy being "greeted with respect" around town, "have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets," yet "they devour widow's houses" and offer "long prayers" for the sake of keeping up appearances.

After addressing the widow's gift with his disciples, Jesus declares the destruction of the Temple, the sacred structure that those gifts supported. By chapter 14, he is betrayed and led off for a prosecution that will lead to his death.

Did you notice any common thread that keeps coming up, friends? Money and possessions seem to be the common theme. Over and over again in this portion of Mark, Jesus talks about money and possessions in addition to his critique of the religious scholars. He points out their abuse of power, which includes money, as he talks about the widow's last two copper coins.

Knowing that these conversations led to Jesus' death, it is with some fear and trembling that this preacher begins to discuss topics like stewardship. And yet Jesus spoke about money and possessions as well as their power to influence our decisions more than any other topic.

After a stunning critique of the hypocrisy of the religious elite of his time for their outward appearances while they participated willingly or blindly in the very systems and rules that caused widows to lose their homes and livelihoods, Jesus sits down opposite the treasury where the faithful people placed their gifts. The religious elite, whom he had just criticized, are putting large sums of money into the coffers of the Temple treasury. In a day where coinage and precious metals serve as money, it's clear how much everyone is able to give. You can see the offering by the size and weight of the bags they carry.

A poor widow approaches the offering slots. While others are putting in their visible gifts, the widow's gift is not even recognizable. It doesn't even make half the noise of the larger sacks of coins being dumped in that day. Her two small copper coins barely make a "clink" into the Temple coffers.

Yet Jesus notices her gift above all the others. He has a tendency to do that, doesn't he? He notices the soft touch on the hem of his garment by a woman who needs healing while others are crowded around him. He notices the children over the adults that gather at his side as he places them on his knee. He looks over and sees the widow as she drops in the two small coins into the treasury.

Not missing the moment, Jesus calls his disciples to his side as he says, “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.”¹ No one else noticed her gift that day, but Jesus did. He saw her offering. As surely as he saw the long robes, the demands for respect, the first class synagogue seats, the long prayers, and the oppression of widows by the religious elite, Jesus also noticed the gift of a widow who placed her all into the Temple treasury that day.

Perhaps it was that she was thankful for what God had done in her life. At the same time, it was also true that the oppressive rules and systems of the age left her with only two small copper coins that amounted to nothing in the Temple treasury. Eugene Peterson paraphrases Jesus’ words this way: “The truth is that this poor widow gave more to the collection than all the others put together. All the others gave what they’ll never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn’t afford—she gave her all.”² That day, nothing became extravagant.

Several years ago when I was serving in a small town in Upper Michigan, a woman had just moved back to town to live with her own mother. She had lived away from her mother for a while as she struggled with many different issues. The woman was joined by her teenage daughter, whom I’ll call “Tricia.” The town was small with only a few hundred people. There wasn’t much for most people to do in that town, so many younger people in the area lived at or below the poverty level. This was especially true if you didn’t have a job in a larger town as well as reliable transportation to get you there. I’m pretty sure that Tricia’s family knew this common struggle.

Despite the difficulties, Tricia’s family was in church almost every Sunday. They loved the Lord with all their heart. Tricia even joined my Confirmation class while I was there.

I don’t know if I had been preaching on stewardship or teaching about giving back to God in my Confirmation class at the time, but one Sunday Tricia came to church with a paper bag filled with something for me. She handed me the bag and said, “Pastor, I’ve been praying about this and I think that I need to give this over to the church. Please take it, sell it, and use the money to help the poor.” I opened the bag and inside there were several pieces of costume jewelry that didn’t amount to much.

Curious, I asked Tricia to tell me about the jewelry. As she took each one out, she told me the story behind each piece. She talked about who gave it to her and what each one meant to her. Then she said, “But God can use this more than I can.”

In my head, I wondered what I would do with the costume jewelry. Who would buy it? What could be done with it? What difference would selling it ever make for the poor?

In those moments, I realized that before me stood a young woman with a heart filled with gratitude for what God had done in her life. I know that she and her family didn’t have much, but they had grown to love the Lord in that small church. As a result, Tricia was giving God all she had. By anyone else’s standards, it may have been worthless. That day, however, Tricia offered a

larger gift than this pastor and everyone else in the church. We gave out of our abundance, but she gave everything she had on top of her dresser at home.

Tricia's heart challenged me that day. In fact, it transformed me. Could I ever give like that? Could I ever be like the widow that put her last two copper coins in the Temple treasury? I've not done it yet. Would I? Wouldn't we all like to think that we would? And yet, do I?

As I read this scripture this past week, it was so tempting to simply turn to the widow's mite and ignore Jesus' warning to the religious elite. I would imagine that the scribes thought that they were doing what was right in the eyes of God. I'm not so sure that they consciously thought that their prayers or long robes were to boast of their closeness to God. Did they realize that they were not treating widows and orphans with justice and compassion? Did they know that they were participating in the injustices against them?

I wonder if we are not necessarily the religious elite or the widow as we gather for worship this morning. Rather, do we find ourselves living somewhere between these two parts of the story? Can we really give everything to God or the Church? Is that what Jesus asking? Or will we always be giving from our abundance? On the other hand, could it be that there are times when we give into the norms of our society, or maintaining the status quo, and in so doing, does our silence speak volumes?

On Monday, we awoke to the horrible news of yet another deadly shooting spree that had occurred in Las Vegas this time. One man went on a shooting rampage, violently taking 58 lives and wounding almost 500 more. Crowds of people have been traumatized. If we watched the news or even listened on the radio, the images are forever etched into our memories. As a nation, we gather for worship this morning with so many wondering whether anywhere is safe in the world anymore. We grieve as we search for answers and mourn the loss of innocent lives to violence.

Politicians argue about whether the law needs to be changed. Before we know it, we are shouting at one another and calling one another names yet again rather than trying to find better ways to live with one another. Eventually, people will throw their hands up, saying, "We just can't agree," rather than working hard to find solutions to prevent senseless acts of violence like this from ever occurring again. When we give up because our disagreements are too great, do we allow violence to become a new normal for us? Just because it's hard to work for a better solution, do we give up doing so?

Perhaps Jesus understood our struggles with money and power and unknowingly participating in the new normal of our world. As a result, he draws attention to the widow's extravagant gift as well as offers the stinging critique of those who have left her penniless.

Am I like the religious elite as I come to worship on Sunday? Do I allow certain norms and rules to shut people out and sustain injustices? Oh, Lord, I hope not!

How much am I like the widow, though, as I continue to give from my abundance? Thankful for what I have received, I strive to live generously even though I'm not always successful.

Perhaps giving is most transformational for us when we seek to be more like the widow. In those moments, the act of giving changes us as we lose our attachment to the power of our possessions and money has less control in our lives.

When we give generously, we realize the tremendous power that God gives us to make a difference in the lives of others; to break the power of rules that devour widows' houses or keep people bound in poverty. When we give with the widow, we discover the power to live out love in ways that become transformational in the lives of others.

Today, we are giving Bibles to third graders. It is something that we do every year. It's made possible because at Birmingham and Berkley First, we honor God through excellence, even in our giving. We live generous lives because we want the children of our communities to know they are loved by God who empowers them to transform the world with that love.

This past weekend, several youth and adults travelled into the city for Hands 4 Detroit. Empowered by your gifts and sharing the gift of time, we made God's love real at a new church start that received a much-needed sprucing up inside and outside of their building as they minister to people in their community. Several youth sorted good to be distributed to hungry homes throughout the area.

Generous living moves us beyond ourselves to be a transforming presence. It changes us and it changes our world.

Growing up, my maternal grandmother would knit slippers for all of her family members for Christmas each year. As we opened our presents each year, we all knew what we were getting from Grandma. She didn't have a lot of money, but she would spend all year knitting those slippers for the ones she loved. Even more so, she was a polio survivor who struggled with the effects of post-polio throughout her life. The polio had affected her hands. As a result, she had to knit up close to her chest. For years, we'd giggle about Grandma's slippers and whether we got the right size.

In my sophomore year of college, Grandma passed away. At her funeral, even her priest talked about the slippers that she made for Christmas. I still have the last pair she made for me. I put them on when I want to feel close to her. When I wear them, I remember how much love and care she put into them.

I'm not like my grandmother, or Tricia, or even the widow. But I want to be—to live generously, to give extravagantly so that lives may be transformed, including my own, until we see the change that we strive to be in the world around us by the grace of God.

¹ Mark 12:33-34, NRSV.

² Mark 12:33-34, *The Message*.