

Sermon for July 28, 2019
Lev. 22: 1-3; 17-21; 29-33; Mark 12: 41-44
St. Andrew Presbyterian Church
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Let these words, like the widow's coins, be blessed by you, O Lord. Amen.

Giving Back

Being part of a church is an interesting experience, isn't it? Where else can we meet so many different, faithful, unique, and sometimes even challenging, people? Church certainly gives us the distinct opportunity to practice loving one another, with all our many quirks, present pastor included.

Being a pastor, I've had lots of opportunities to practice what I preach. One former couple comes to mind. They were not only set in their ways, but set in their ways with concrete. A part of the challenge was that they really did not understand why we, as Presbyterians, do the things the way we do them.

A case in point is when I re-arranged the order of service so that the offering would be placed after the sermon instead of right after the opening hymn, where a former pastor had put it. This particular couple did not like that change. The husband came to me and pointed out that I was taking a big chance moving the offering because if he did not like my sermon, then he most likely would not give anything. Better to keep the offering before the sermon to get the whole amount.

What he did not understand is what many in the church do not understand. The offering is not called a "collection" or "dues" for a reason. It isn't payment for what church members like or don't like, nor is it a contribution to keep the club running. An offering, as our two readings illustrate, is a sacrifice made to God. That is why it is placed where it is in our order of worship, as our grateful response to God's Word, Jesus Christ, and all that God has given to us. It defines who we are: **a people who give back in gratitude.**

Let's look first at Leviticus. As far back as the sixth or fifth centuries before Christ, when Leviticus was most likely written down, people brought offerings or made sacrifices. What, exactly, is a sacrifice? The root meaning of the word is "to make holy." When we make a sacrifice, we are helping to make something holy. According to Leviticus, God expected sacrifices, and God was particular about those sacrifices.

God demanded the people to give a sacrifice that was worthy of who God is. God certainly did not need their cooked meat, but God knew the people needed to give in order to remember who they were: God's chosen people in relationship with him.

When God said, “You shall not offer anything that has a blemish,” and when God used the words *sacrifice*, *thanksgiving*, *sacred donation*, and *offering*, God was asking for something that cost them. God did not want their leftovers, scraps, or secondhand fruits or animals. He wanted the best they had to give. Why? Because of the statement repeated six times in these verses: “I am the Lord.” Not them. A servant, as Jesus reminded us, is never above the master.

Today, we worshippers often tend to think of giving to the church, which is giving to God, as optional. For many, we give what we have after our own needs and wants have been met. Once we make our car payment, pay off our house, arrange for vacation, make sure the bills are paid, then we can give something to God. Our financial giving becomes more convenient than sacrificial, and it influences the same kind of giving of our time, energy, gifts, and talents. It is so much easier to give what’s left over than to give the best of what we have been given by God to God.

Which brings us to the gospel lesson, the poor widow who “gave extravagantly what she couldn’t afford—she gave her all.” This little snapshot comes at the end of Chapter 12 of Mark, a chapter that begins with a story about the owner of a vineyard sending his son to collect what is due; then goes to giving to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and leads to hearing the greatest commandment of all: *Love the Lord with all our hearts, souls, strength, and minds. All.* These passages seem to suggest that what God wants, however, isn’t just our money, as if God needs it. Or a portion of our time. Or a talent checked off in a box. What God wants is ALL of us. Everything. Nothing held back.

The widow’s action is a challenging lesson, one we in our comfortable worlds don’t much want to hear. How can we possibly give God everything when we have deadlines and responsibilities, needy friends and ill family members? What does that even mean, to give God everything? Does it mean we disregard our friends, our families, our church and go live out in a desert somewhere? Does it mean all we do is read our Bibles and pray? Does it mean we should feel guilty if we don’t do “churchy things” 24/7? How do we know what it means to give God our all?

We look at this simple story again. We find Jesus now in the Temple, sitting with the very people he accuses of being hypocrites, those who give large sums of money as a sign of piety simply because they have large sums of money to give. Remember, there was no paper currency or checks back then, so when these leaders made their contributions, their multiple heavy coins created loud jangling in the bowl that everyone could hear. No sacrifice was involved and no genuine gratitude was expressed. Quite a flashy, noisy show was taking place in the house of God, but Jesus is not impressed.

Since their inception, offerings have been symbolic of honoring something bigger than we are, and thanking that Being for caring for someone as small as us. Offerings are signs of genuine gratitude. But that isn’t what Jesus sees in that place of worship or in

those people's lives. "If you give what you don't need, it isn't really giving," Mother Teresa once said.

But then Jesus spots a woman, a widow, considered in that time on the margins of society. We are not told her age, or whether children are with her. All we know is that Jesus watches her come forward with two little coins, called *lepta* in Greek, so cheaply minted that the sides aren't smooth and Caesar's image isn't centered. The two coins together are worth less than a penny, so thin that they make no noise when dropped in the plate. We can imagine the leaders in the flowing robes scoffing at her, if they noticed her at all, and asking, "Why even bother?" But Jesus is so impressed that he calls his disciples over to him—"Come here. Look at what this woman did!"--to teach them yet another lesson about genuine sacrifice, about making something holy, about gratitude. What the others gave, they will never miss. But she gave her all—all she had to live on. She gave herself.

That offering is why Jesus notices and comments on her action—because it is so rare--and because he is about to do the same. Jesus is about to go to the cross and give his all, his life, for us.

Jesus commends this widow's actions making her a role model for us. But there is a flip side to this passage, as well. Jesus also issues a condemnation. He condemns the wealthy who gain their wealth by preying off the less fortunate—"devouring widow's houses," as Mark puts it a bit earlier in this chapter. Jesus condemns social and religious institutions, like the Temple, or the church, for allowing such poverty to exist. He commends the impoverished widow who gives all she has, but he condemns the wealthy scribes who ignore her, and others like her, who reject all the prophets who issued God's commands to care for the orphaned, the widowed, the foreigner, and the outcast.

This seemingly simple and familiar episode in the ministry of Jesus Christ becomes quite challenging to us, in the 21st century. From it, we are encouraged to look at our giving, to inquire whether it is truly sacrificial in nature or whether we are giving from our surplus, from what we will never miss, in regard to money, service, time, attention, and our very lives. Let's be clear that there is nothing we can do or give to earn God's love. We are already and always loved as we are. But, we are also invited to look at how well we are responding to that love and to what degree our giving matches our gratitude.

And, we are also invited to honestly examine our social and religious institutions, to determine whether the rich are living off of the backs of the poor, whether more money is poured into buildings instead of people, and to evaluate how well we, both as individuals and as the church, are living into the commandments in scripture. Who is the neighbor we are to love? It is the Samaritan, the one most unlike us. With whom are we called to share? With anyone who has less than us, regardless of race, religion, and origin. For whom are we to speak? For the voiceless, those on the margins, those who have no

advocates. Who is to be the greatest? Who is to be number one? To paraphrase Jesus, it is not his disciples. We are called to be the least and the last.

Just for a moment, imagine a different ending to this story. Imagine that the scribe jingling his coins in the bowl actually paid attention (as Jesus did) to this nondescript, nameless woman. Imagine if, despite his arrogance or bias, he called to mind the commandment to love his neighbor. Imagine if, when he saw the widow drop her two coins into the bowl, he made his way to her, indifferent to what the other scribes thought, took her aside, and offered from the richness of his own life, to share with her. Imagine that Jesus would then pull his disciples aside and say, “This, this is what you are to do in my name. This is the sacrifice that makes the world holy.”

And that is where our benediction, our sending, leads us. We are called into the world to give our two pennies, like the widow, “and much more.” Our worship in here—our sacraments, our confessions, our affirmations of faith, our proclamation of the Word, our offerings—are in preparation to send us out there. Our sacrifices are what will make the world holy. May we be a people who give back in gratitude.

Amen.