

Ouch! Did you hear what Jesus said this morning? He had some scathing things to say about the religious leaders—how they like to parade around in long robes, love to be recognized in public, and enjoy the best seats at banquets—well, those words really sting! I mean, here I am wearing long robes today. And I love it when somebody notices me in a large crowd and says hi. And when it comes to getting a good seat, at potlucks I try to stake out a place closest to the food. So, when Jesus says that, I get a little nervous.

How about you? I know not too many of you are religious leaders yourselves, but did you feel nervous too? Think of it this way—when Mark tells us that Jesus “sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box,” the evangelist isn’t just giving us some minor detail. Nobody, I mean nobody in Jerusalem would’ve just sat down in the temple court like that. It would’ve been strange, maybe even disrespectful. The only one known to sit in a place like that was King David in the tabernacle. It’s as if Mark’s telling us that Jesus is the new Davidic king, who is now sitting in judgment as He watches the people put in their offerings. Getting nervous yet?

Anyway, folks are dropping in their money into one of these thirteen horn-shaped offering boxes that stand in the Women’s Court—six of which are freewill offerings. Which means that this isn’t a tithe—no, that’s something altogether different—people have *already* given their 10% to God. What this is, is going the extra mile, over and above kind of giving, doing it because I want to not because I have to. And as He’s sitting there in judgment, Jesus notices two types of people.

First, there are those who enjoy the attention. They’re carrying fistfuls of coinage like they’re playing the slots; they love to hear the big sound that it makes—clinkety-clink-clank-clunk. And as they’re praised for their generosity, among the loud applause they mistakenly hear God’s clapping too. But they’re the type of people Jesus would say have already gotten their reward with the praise of men.

We, ourselves, would never do that, right—no, we give discretely. We fold our checks in half so no one can see, we gesture in a such a way that nobody can tell which bill we put into the plate, we ensure that not a soul in the church knows what anyone gives. Some of us do that because we’ve heard texts like this before—we don’t want to be showy—but maybe others of us do that because we’re embarrassed people might see how little we actually give. But then there are others, like those people today, who in our heart of hearts might actually assume we can somehow buy God’s love. Now, we know that’s not true at a conscious level, but subconsciously somehow it’s just programmed into us that the more we give the more God will be pleased—after all, “God loves a cheerful giver.” *Maybe if I’m extra cheerful, we might think, God will really love me.* Feeling nervous?

Then the second type of person Jesus notices is this poor widow. Now, who knows how *He* knows she’s a widow—perhaps they’ve met before, maybe it’s the sort of community where everyone knows each other, maybe it’s just in the way she presents herself . . . or maybe it’s because He’s the all-knowing God. But as she slips in undetected, just another face in the crowd, no pomp or circumstance this time—she sure gets Jesus’ attention. And instead of being disgusted with her offering like the rest of them, in the person of Jesus God is well-pleased with the gift that she makes.

Now remember, widows don’t *have to* tithe—that 10% doesn’t apply to them because they’re not landowners or really have any source of income. No, instead they’re charity cases—there’s an offering box in the temple set aside just for them. You might say, *But wouldn’t they inherit their husband’s estate?* Well, don’t forget what Jesus says, how the scribes “consume widow’s houses”—after that, there might not be much left to tithe. So, widows don’t really have to give anything—but that doesn’t stop this woman from coming forward with her above-and-beyond type of giving. What might not sound like much to the people around her—the hollow clink-clink of two lepta, the least valuable coin known in circulation at the time, the word lepton meaning “small” or “thin”—well, that might not have sounded like much to anyone else, but to God that sounded like a million bucks.

So, what's the takeaway? Well, a lot of us might use this as an excuse. The widow only put in a little bit and Jesus commends her, so it's okay for me—because I'm not vainglorious like the scribes—to put in a little bit too. That sounds fine and good until Jesus praises her, “Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, *all she had to live on.*” Here's this woman, with barely anything, who doesn't *have* to give anything. Yet, she gives all that she has, everything she's got, to the Lord. And Jesus *praises* her for it! Nervous now? I'd be surprised if anyone in this room was sitting easy after hearing Jesus say that.

The point then, is to put in everything we've got, right? Jesus is saying, whatever it is, even if the last thing in your pocket book is just one small penny with Honest Abe's face on it, if that's all you have left to your name, Jesus is saying to fork it over. Even if you don't have an income and have to tithe 10% of your earnings to the Lord, He still wants you to earn extra credit and give whatever you do have. Isn't that what He's saying? Well . . .

There was this one mother, and she would frequently take trips abroad. And whenever she did, she would always send her daughter lavish souvenirs from the places she went. After going to Paris, her daughter received an exquisite painting from an up and coming French artist. From Rome, the mother sent her a jewel-encrusted crucifix. And now for her daughter's birthday, the daughter had gotten a new gift in the mail. After tearing off the wrapping paper, her daughter revealed a beautiful fine vase. After a gift like that, you'd think anyone would be grateful. But instead she just tossed it aside, put her head in her hands, and wept. In between sobs, she cried, “Oh, Mom! I don't want any more things—no more flowers, no more vases, no more trinkets—I just want you, Mom. *You!*”

As Jesus sat down across from the treasury, He must've wept inside. So many of these people thought God wanted their money—what would *He* need money for? What He wanted was *them!* Just *them*. When it came to the widow, by putting in all she had to live on she was actually giving God her life—she was giving all of herself to God. And that's all Jesus wanted, just her. He wants to be close, to be connected, to be in relationship. How can God be near, how can there be intimacy, if money, or stuff, or anything else is in the way? The widow wouldn't allow for that, so she pushed it all aside and put herself in God's hands.

For many of us today, the surprising truth is, God doesn't want your money. The only thing God wants is *you*. He wants your heart; He wants your love; He wants to be in relationship with you. And by giving of yourself by money, by serving Him, and by sharing your time (what we typically call time, talent, and treasure) you ensure that none of that stands in the way between you and God. I know you want Him, He's the only thing that makes sense, the only thing that matters, in the end God's all that there is. And so by your pledges today, by your minimum first-fruits giving of 10% of your income, by your special offerings, by your volunteering at church, and attendance in worship and Bible study—in all of these things—you put yourself in God's hands, give your life over to the Lord, offer Him your heart. And in so doing, you also receive His.

Y'know, as much as it is about us, this text is really about Him, isn't it? Jesus has been known to compare Himself to widows before—remember the one who searched for the lost coin? Well, Jesus has been known to seek and to save the lost before. But He's also been known to offer Himself, sacrifice everything He's got as well. The very last thing that's said about this woman, how “she put in everything that she had, all she had to live on”—the Greek can be literally translated as “living” . . . but better yet, “life.” She offered up her very life.

So did Jesus. It's crazy how we let sin get in the way sometimes—our stinginess, our greed, our discontentment—we let those things come between us and God. Yet, here comes Jesus, taking those sins away, bearing them Himself, even becoming that sin for us, so that they'd no longer get in the way. And on the cross, He stretches out His arms, looks to the heavens, and He offers Himself in sacrifice on our behalf. He lays down His life for our sake, gives to God all that He is, pours Himself out by shedding His blood. He even says, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” Like that widow, He gives His living, His very life. Now, nothing stands in God's way of getting to you. And by your offerings, God's path is able to stay clear.

11.11.2018  
Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Stewardship Sunday)  
Mark 12:38-44

Rev. David V. Miller  
Lutheran Church of the Ascension  
Atlanta, GA

You've probably noticed that pastors make a certain gesture when we pray. We hold out our hands and stretch them up toward God in a position called the *orans*. It might seem like one of those fancy liturgical poses, but there's more to it than that. It's a posture of sacrifice—the Bible talks about prayer as a pleasing sacrifice to God—so surely we offer up our petitions to the heavens. But at the same time, the posture isn't just one of giving . . . but of receiving. We know that our offerings return with interest. We get more than we give. And so we have arms wide open, ready to catch such blessings.

Of course, there are the martyrs. They gave their temporal earthly lives, and in return they received eternal life in heaven. But even in our small, little, miniscule offerings like the widow's in today's Gospel—as we give God our all; our hearts, our souls, our very being—we get more than we could ever give. We get His care, His attention, His presence in our lives. We get the joy of seeing Him at work in our everyday. We get the peace of having Him always there for us. We get the hope of knowing that this isn't all there is. But most of all, we get His love—and that's all we're really after. Everything we do, anything we ever strive for, whatever it is we seek after is ultimately a pursuit of love. And here, as we offer our hearts to God, He gives us His on a silver platter.

The thing about the *orans* is, unless your arms are open in offering, you can't also be open to receiving. How can you get anything if your arms are closed; full of money, things, other priorities? But when those things are lifted up, sacrificed, then nothing can get in the way of what God has to give. The best part about giving your all—which really isn't much, maybe a widow's mite or two—is that you get *His all*—even God Himself. Without Him, you have nothing. But with Him, you have *everything*.