

CALLED TO GIVE

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
November 7, 2021**

Psalm 146
Mark 12:38-44

Money is a powerful motivator—for good as well as bad—and we all are subject to changing our tune when substantial amounts of it are involved. We become more agreeable. We flatter and coddle. You see it in big business, in restaurants, in retail shops, in families, in charities. We play favorites. We lavish attention and favor on those who have more, who spend more, who give more. Even in the church, we are not immune from such things, from treating the big givers as if they are the pillars on which the church is built. And let me tell you—even though in most churches only a handful people know the details of anybody’s giving—in every church I’ve ever been associated with, it seems like everybody has a pretty good idea of who the pillars are. You notice things like that.

Certainly, in today’s lesson from Mark’s gospel, the disciples are noticing. They’ve followed Jesus to Jerusalem, the capital city, the very nexus of their nation and faith. The disciples, fresh from provincial Galilee, are especially impressed with the great temple, and why not?—it was one of the wonders of the ancient world. King Herod may have been a tyrant, but he was also a great builder, and the reconstruction of the temple was his masterwork. The disciples are all agog: “Look, Teacher, what huge stones; what large buildings!” But Jesus isn’t impressed. He prophesies the destruction of the temple. “Not one stone will be left standing on another,” he tells them.¹

And inside the impressive temple, of course, are many impressive people. Can’t you just imagine these twelve country mice from out in Galilee, who have come to the big city? “Master, look at those scribes, people who have spent their whole lives studying the Bible. Look at their long robes and the way everyone defers to them.” In those days, only people who didn’t have to do physical work, who could afford to sit and study all day, could afford to wear long, flowing robes. People who worked with their hands—carpenters and fishermen and such—had to dress more practically.

But again, Jesus is unimpressed. “Beware of these scribes who like to walk about in long robes and receive honor from the public,” he tells them.²

Then Jesus sits them down “opposite the treasury,” just across from where people are filing by and offering their gifts to the work of the temple. It’s a good place to get a view of “who’s who” in the city. Of course, they didn’t have checks or pledge cards or online giving back then. People were dropping off big, heavy bags of cash money—coins—into this treasury.

¹ Mark 13:1-2.

² Mark 12:38.

I remember, as a student, coming into New York City from Princeton with friends and walking up Fifth Avenue. As students, we were always broke, so window shopping was all we could afford. But we loved watching the “beautiful people” go in and out of shops on Fifth Avenue—Bergdorf’s and Cartier, Dunhill and Saks, Steuben Glass and Harry Winston—sometimes leaving a car and driver idling at the curb while they shopped. We imagined them all to be fabulously rich, captains of industry, movie stars, celebrities. Anyone who could afford to shop in those stores had to be somebody important.

And I suppose anyone who could afford to drop a big bag of money in the temple treasury had to be somebody important, somebody worth noticing. “Many rich people put in large sums,” says Mark.³ The disciples notice these big givers; how can you miss them? Yet, to be fair, these rich people probably don’t think they’re there to flaunt their wealth. They are doing the Lord’s work, helping to support the temple. They are tithers, the top givers.

I once sat on the development committee of a school board during a big capital campaign. When we met with the fundraising consultant, she told us, “You need to make a list of your top 100 givers and figure out how much they can give. Seventy-five percent of most capital campaigns is given by only about a dozen people. Your more affluent, major givers are the key.”

We, like the disciples, notice the major givers. Of course, these large givers, though they give the greatest amount, rarely give the greatest percentage of their income. A \$10,000 gift for a millionaire is a lower percentage of income than a \$1,000 gift is for an average person. Most of us give something off the top. We have what’s called the “Goodwill Industries” philosophy of giving. We give only from our surplus, whatever someone else doesn’t want, our cast offs. “Here is what I don’t really need anyway, so I might as well give it to the church.”

And right there is where Jesus points his disciples’ attention toward a stooped, older woman, nearly hidden by the flowing robes of the really important people as they file by the treasury. Two copper coins are all that she has to give and she gives it all. And she is the one whom Jesus notices. Jesus is impressed by someone whom we might have missed, had not he pointed her out to us.

We give a percentage. Stewardship consultants tell churches, “Stress percentages, not amounts. Urge people to move up just one percent in their giving for next year and you will have no trouble meeting your budget.”

Jesus doesn’t stress proportionate giving, or percentages. He notices that the widow gave everything, all. Earlier, when asked by his critics, “What is the greatest commandment?” Jesus had replied, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.”⁴ See? That is exactly what this woman has done. She has fulfilled the greatest commandment. She has just loved God with all that she has.

³ Mark 12:41.

⁴ Mark 12:30.

One of the problems with percentages is that they can delude us into thinking that, if we just meet a certain level, a certain percentage, we have thereby fulfilled all righteousness. “There, here’s my 10 percent, which is a lot more than most people give. I’ve done my bit. The rest is mine.” It’s easy to grow full of yourself with that kind of thinking, that kind of giving.

I think that’s why Jesus was impressed with this poor widow. She had a genuine piety, a bona fide spirituality that was willing to empty herself so that she might be filled with God. “She gave everything she had,” Jesus said. And so would he: give everything he had on the cross, dying to self in order to place his life completely in God’s hands. What Jesus saw in that widow, was not wealth as the world sees it, measured in bank balances and equity portfolios, but wealth measured by her openness to allow God to do with her life what a kind and loving God can and will do with a life given so generously, which is raise it to new life.

A lot of people misread this story of the widow’s mite, saying that it proves that the size of the gift that we place in God’s hands really doesn’t matter. A gift of two pennies is worth as much as a check for a hundred. So, give the two pennies and keep the rest for yourself. But that’s not the point of this story at all. Whether what you give to God be in the form or time or talent or money or all of the above, the point of this story is that what is left counts the most.

The gift that is given, if we are to take this story seriously, has to be measured not just in terms of the intention and motivation of the giver, but in relationship to what is left after the gift is given. Because what is left after the gift is given is the truest measure of our trust in God. She gave everything she had. In other words, she trusted God with everything. Can you say the same? I wonder if I can?

We build up our bank accounts and save against a rainy day, and worry when we read about rising inflation, and scour Mr. Forbes’s magazine looking for a way to hedge the future, because we’re not sure of anything in this unsure world, not the least of which is our income. We’re not sure that the job we have today will be there tomorrow. We’re not sure we can keep our head above water. We’re not sure we’re putting enough away for our retirement. We don’t know whether we can afford a college degree for our children when their time comes to go. In fact, we’re not sure there is a future in this world where climate change and political division and random violence threaten. All of which is to say that we’re not sure that the future will be any good. Or that there even will be a future.

And that, let me tell you, is a theological statement, if you hadn’t noticed. It says something about God. Because what we are saying is that we’re not sure that God will be there in the future for us, in the same way that God has been in the past.

And that, in spite of the fact that God has promised never to leave us. How is it the risen Jesus put it to us? “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

It was Ernest Campbell who once said, the most important question of stewardship in light of the fact that God has given us everything is not the measure of what we will give, but what we will keep, and why.

The widow in the temple asked herself that question, and came up with the answer, “Nothing.” She would keep nothing in the face of all that God had given her, because she trusted that all that she might ever need in life, she would have as long as she had God, or better said, as long as God had her.

Even in the midst of her poverty she came to that conclusion. Even knowing that the institution to which she gave her money was far from perfect, she came to that conclusion. Even though she had lost the most important one in her life and missed him every morning and wept for him every night, she came to that conclusion.

She trusted that in spite of all that, or because of all that, God’s goodness would never stop being there for her, giving her all that she would ever need and more.

Do you think you could live like that? In times like these? At any time? Believing that God will never stop being there for you, giving you all that you need and even more?

November is the time of our annual stewardship campaign. But stewardship for Christians is not just one day or one month, but all fall, and into the winter, and next year, too, next spring, and next summer. All of it is stewardship season as we receive and give back what God gives us. And the question is “How much do you believe that you can trust God to keep doing so?”

Over the next few weeks, we ask you to make a prayerful estimate of your giving to Union Church for the year ahead. You can drop your pledge card in the offering plate on Sunday morning or mail it into the church office. As you make out your card, keep enough to pay the bills and do what needs to be done to hold body and soul together. Give to God what you believe belongs to God. And give some thought to what you’re holding back, and why. Because what you are deciding is a measure of your trust in God, and whether God is as good as you think.

I’ve got a feeling it will be good for my soul to do that, to decide that question. My guess is that it’ll be good for your soul to do so as well.

To the Lord our God, alpha and omega, be all glory and honor for ever. Amen.