

## THE SACRIFICIAL GIFT

Mark 12: 38-44

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*“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: 43-44

Sixteen billion dollars.

That’s the latest, best estimate of the amount of money that was spent on this year’s election.

Sixteen billion (with a B) dollars.

Three times as much as was spent 12 years ago. That’s sixteen thousand million.

Kind of hard to get our minds around that much money, isn’t it? Maybe this will help:

A billion seconds ago it was 1992.

A billion minutes ago, the year was 125 AD and the book of Revelation had just been written.

A billion hours ago, it was the Stone Age.

A billion days ago the earliest ancestors of human beings were just beginning to walk on two legs.

If you wanted to print a book with a billion dollar signs in it, a thousand to a page, printed on both sides of the page, your book would be 500,000 pages long and 100 feet thick. Sixteen of those books would be as thick as 5 football fields.

The median income in the United States is about \$78,000 per year. If you earned the median income of \$78,000 per year and saved all of it -- never spent even a dime -- you could save \$1 billion in just 20,000 years.

With sixteen billion dollars you could build that wall that’s going to keep all the illegal immigrants out of the United States. OR, you could build enough schools to educate the 98 million girls in the world who are not enrolled in school. OR, you could dig 1.5 million wells that would provide clean drinking water for the 800 million people in the world who do not have it. OR, you could feed half of all the hungry people in the world for one year. OR, you could eradicate polio, worldwide. OR, you could provide health insurance for 1.5 million Americans. OR, you could put a taco truck on 200,000 street corners in America (about 1/3 of the total).

You could build, roughly, 600,000 tiny houses to house the homeless. That’s very nearly all of the homeless people in America on any given night.

Or maybe you’d like to do something more whimsical with your \$16 billion.

The Royal Penthouse Suite at the President Wilson Hotel in Geneva, Switzerland, is the most expensive hotel room in the world. It costs \$65,000 per night. You could stay there every night for 675 years.

The most expensive yacht ever purchased was Le Grand Bleu at \$90 million. For \$16 billion you could buy about 178 of them.

Instead of doing any of that, however, we spent the money trying to convince about 5% of the voters who hadn't made up their minds to vote for this-or-that candidate by telling them the same things over and over and over and over again. No matter what political party we support, I think any reasonable person has to wonder if that's the best way \$16 billion could be spent.

Because once it was spent on those political ads, it couldn't be spent on other things. Other things, important things, were sacrificed so the money could go to those advertisements.

And that brings us to our topic for this morning: sacrifice or, more specifically, giving sacrificially.

### **THE WIDOW'S MITE**

In the third chapter of the Gospel of Luke, John the Baptist is asked what people must do to avoid God's wrath.

John was well grounded within the prophetic tradition, and he answered as all the prophets had answered before him: be kind and generous to the poor and needy. Specifically, he said, "If you have two coats and your neighbor has none, give one of your coats to your neighbor. And do likewise with food." (Luke 3:10) That is, share your excess, the things you don't really need, with those who don't have the necessities of life – food, clothing, shelter, etc.

This had been part of the Mosaic Law for centuries: Leave un-gleaned grain in the fields for the poor to harvest for themselves. Pay your workers at the end of every day so they can feed their families. Give 1/10 of your income to the temple where the priests would distribute some of it to the poor. And every seven years, forgive any debts that are owed to you.

All of this amounted to the same thing, however: Give generously from your excess.

In today's passage, Jesus takes this admonition to the next level. Watch.

When the story opens, Jesus and the disciples are walking through the marketplace in the center of Jerusalem, a big, famous market, and Jesus is making some observations and commenting on them.

Watch out for the scribes, he says. These are the experts in the law who are supposed to use their expertise to help the people lead good, moral lives. Instead, they manipulate and use the law for their own financial advantage. Specifically, they find loopholes. These loopholes allowed them to foreclose on loans they made to widows and take possession of those unfortunate women's land -- land that they inherited from their husbands and was the only security they had.

These scribes like to be treated with privilege and respect because of their knowledge of the law, but they use that knowledge to take advantage of the poor and the defenseless. They have no sympathy, no pity, no concern for anything but themselves.

Oh, they say long prayers in worship. They are great prayer writers, but that's all just for show. They are like toadstools. They look upright and proper on the outside but they're all mushy and rotten on the inside.

Eventually Jesus and his entourage come to the center of the marketplace, where the Temple is located. They take a seat and watch the people coming and going, especially the ones who are going to the Temple Treasury, bringing their monthly tithe – one tenth of what they have produced or grown.

The wealthy, probably some of whom are the scribes he has just observed, are making a big production out of what they give. They give a lot, and they want everyone to know it. They and their gifts are highly visible. "Look at me. Look at how generous and giving I am." They want to make sure the next Sunday School classroom or even the next wing of the building is named after them. They put their envelope in the offering plate face up! You know that old saying about, "What I give to the church is between me and God?" Well, not with these guys. They want everyone to know exactly how much they give because there was status attached to charitable giving back in those days just as there is today.

Then, right in the middle of all this showmanship, a little old widow lady makes her way to the teller's window, and she empties her purse. Out fall two pennies, all she has. The teller turns up his nose and asks her, half-jokingly, "Will you be needing a receipt, madam?"

Embarrassed and humiliated, she turns and walks away but Jesus has come up and blocked her path. He puts his arm around her and leads her to where his disciples are sitting.

He invites her to sit with them as he says to his disciples: "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."

And that, brothers and sisters, is a game changer.

With that one sentence, Jesus has taken the prophetic tradition and turned it on its head.

### **WHAT WE KEEP FOR OURSELVES**

Up to this point, we have been told that God judges us by what we give to the temple and to the poor. Our gifts were weighed and measured. Were they truly a tenth of our income as required by the Torah? Were they truly from the first fruits, the best that we had to offer? Were they unblemished, the most valuable of the livestock?

The focus was, up to now, on the value of what we gave.

But now *Jesus has changed the focus*. He has turned the camera around and the judgment is no longer directed at the gifts. We are no longer judged for how much we give. We are judged for how much we keep for ourselves.

This is a whole new, uniquely Christian way of looking at charity: ***Sacrificial Giving***.

For Christians, Jesus says, giving from our excess, from the stuff we don't need, from the stuff we don't want, is no longer adequate. Christians are now given notice: We are expected to give sacrificially. We are expected to give from what we want and need. We are expected to do without so others can do. We are expected to live more simply so others can simply live.

My kids still talk about how one time they went from house to house for our church's canned food drive and when they got back to the church and sorted and examined the cans they had been given they discovered a little can labeled "tiny cumquats." Clearly, someone had decided that they didn't really need tiny cumquats like they thought they would and so they gave them to the poor. And you know how those poor people love their tiny cumquats.

Jesus says, in today's story, that for too long, the People of God have been giving away their tiny cumquats and convincing themselves that they are making a sacrifice for the poor. They are living like Ty Ty Walden, the patriarch of Erskine Caldwell's scandalous 1933 novel, *God's Little Acre*.

Ty Ty, you may recall, is convinced that his father buried a cache of gold somewhere on the family farm and, if he can find that gold, all of his problems will be solved. So, instead of working the farm, he hires two African American men to do that and he spends all of his time digging holes all over the farm with his two worthless sons, looking for the gold.

Eventually, he even hires an albino man who he is convinced has magical powers to find the gold and pays him what he has promised to pay his farm hands. His hired men, it seems, are the only ones who realize that if there is gold to be found in the soil of the farm, it is to be found not in an empty pipe dream of found wealth but in the soil's ability to reward honest labor with marketable crops. Ty Ty is unconvinced, however, so he keeps on digging.

Years earlier, his father had set aside one of the acres of the farm as God's little acre, the produce of which was to be dedicated to the Lord. Ty Ty becomes convinced that the gold is buried on that acre so he just moves the sign to another acre so he won't have to share the gold, if and when and if he finds it, with God.

But when no gold is found on that acre, he has to try another and that requires him to move the sign again. Over and over Ty Ty moves the sign, designating each new unproductive acre as God's little acre so he won't have to share if he hits it big. And, of course, he never does hit it big.

There's a little Ty Ty Walden in all of us, isn't there? We move God's little acre around: when the kids move out, or after I retire, or when the house is paid for, or when the market settles

down and isn't so volatile. We wait for the time when we can live and give safely. And we forget that the call of the gospel is to live and give sacrificially, as Jesus did.

*The true value of any gift is to be found not in the words of an appraiser but in the sacrifice that made it possible.*

Today, of all days, that should be obvious to us.

Today we asked the veterans who have given days of their lives, precious time that they can never replace, in the service of their country and their countrymen, to stand and be recognized. We thanked them for not just their gift but their sacrifice on our behalf; we were made keenly aware of the value of a sacrificial gift.

Sixty-four years ago, this January the new president, John F. Kennedy paraphrased Judge Oliver Wendell Holmes when he admonished a generation to "ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." How different that is from: "Am I better off now than I was four years ago?"

Sixty-four years ago, our political leaders held up sacrificial living as an ideal to be sought and pursued. Today our leaders ask us to look to our own wellbeing and base our political decisions on that alone.

Well, brothers and sisters, in more than 2,000 years, Jesus has not changed his tune. His call remains the same, his challenge unchanged and undiminished.

Our lives are like the bread and wine of the Eucharist. If we try to save them up, we will lose them. They will grow stale and crumble, they will grow sour and evaporate, they will, inevitably, be lost to us.

No, like the bread and the wine, our lives have meaning not when we save them up for ourselves, but when – only when – we break them up and pour them out and share them sacrificially with our brothers and sisters.

### **APPLES TO APPLES**

The first parsonage we lived in was a two-bedroom cottage on a country road in Fayette County, not far from here on the Greenfield – Sabina Road. It was surrounded by seven apple trees, each bearing a different kind of apple, some of which I had heard of, some I hadn't.

The trees had not been very well taken care of and were in desperate need of pruning and feeding the winter we moved in. Not knowing much about orchard tending, I went to the library and read everything I could find about raising apple trees.

I put the knowledge to use that winter and the following summer, pruning and feeding the trees as the books said. In the summer I sprayed them and fed them and the harvest was phenomenal. They produced a plenteous bounty of apples and my favorite was a crisp, tart,

apple the size of a grapefruit the name of which no one could identify. The tree was just loaded with them and I could hardly wait for them to ripen for the harvest.

Then, one morning, as we ate our breakfast, we heard a terrible, ripping sound followed by a crash from behind the house. We ran out to find that apple tree split down the center and lying on the ground. The weight of the apples had pulled the tree apart. It had been killed by its own prosperity.

Not one of those books I read at the library warned me about the possibility of having too good of a harvest. None of them warned me to prop the limbs up if they began to sag too much from the weight of the apples. None said to pick some of the apples early to relieve the stress on the limbs – to sacrifice some apples so the others could grow to maturity.

And because it did not occur to me to let some apples go, I lost them all.

Friends, this is the one day of the year when we ponder our relationship to the stuff we buy and the stuff we own. Jesus asks us to consider that this stuff is not what life is about. He asks us to consider giving some of it away. Not just the stuff we don't want or need, but the stuff we do want, the stuff we do need.

He asks us to give not just what we can afford to give, but what we can't afford to give. He asks us to stop insisting that we can make our lives secure by buying things.

He asks us to rely a little bit on him, to lean a little bit upon the Lord, and let God be our strength and our security. For that way is the path to the real, the true, the authentic life that is life in God's kingdom.

**AMEN**