

The 25th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 27) | 10 November 2024 | Mark 12,38–44

Have you heard the story about the notorious tightwad who went into a store to find a gift for a business acquaintance? Everything was so expensive that he finally settled on a vase that had been broken into three pieces, which was marked down 90%. He asked the store to wrap it and deliver it, figuring the recipient would assume it was broken during delivery. A week later, he received a note from the gift's recipient. "Thank you so much for the vase," it read. "It was especially thoughtful of you to wrap each piece separately."

When we read a very familiar story like our gospel lesson this morning, it may help a bit to "wrap each piece separately"—in other words, to observe some specific little details that may give us some new insights into the overall meaning of a text.

Our Need To Give

Let's begin with the fact that her gift is made to the Temple treasury. There's nothing unusual about that, perhaps, and it makes this story a natural for a stewardship sermon about giving to the church. But what you may not realize is that in the very next paragraph of Mark's gospel, Jesus is going to talk about how the Temple is going to be destroyed—"not one stone will be left standing on another," he says. That should be a clue to us that the real point here is not the recipient of this gift, but the giver. The cause to which she is giving is going nowhere; yet Jesus notes the generosity of her gift.

A pastor tells of sitting at the bedside of a 90-year-old widow whose entire pension and social security each month went directly to the nursing home that cared for her. She got complete care there, and so on the surface she had no need for any income. But she was apologizing for the fact that she could not longer give to the church. The pastor gently told her that she mustn't worry about it, that she had given so much for so many years and at this point in her life no one could expect her to do any more. Besides, the church was doing just fine. He wanted to help her feel better, but she became very agitated. She shook her finger in his face and rebuked him: "Young man, you listen to me. I am not talking

about the church's need for money. I'm talking about my need to give. I should not be deprived of the opportunity to give!"

"My need to give." That's what this piece is about. To be a Christian is to be one who needs to give, in all kinds of ways. Just as a musician must make music, and a writer must write, so a Christian must give. It is our way of reflecting our heavenly Father, who loved the world so much he gave his only Son.

All We Have Is From God

A second piece: It is significant that this woman in the story is a widow. In ancient Judea, widows were at the bottom of the social ladder. They had no means of support, no Social Security, no income. This woman is described as a "poor widow," and that means, to be blunt, that she was a charity case. She had nothing but what was given to her. Yet all that she has, she gives.

In Luther's *Small Catechism*, we read the familiar words: "God has given me and still preserves my body and soul with all their powers. He provides me with food and clothing, home and family, daily work, and all I need from day to day." Do you get the connection with our story? You and I have nothing except that which God has given us. All that we have is his, given to us as a sign of his gracious love. So we are like this poor widow, who has nothing but what is given her—we, too, have nothing beyond what God gives us.

Our poor widow's generous and giving spirit comes out of her awareness that everything she has is a gift. It frees her, you see, from being possessive of it. And we, if we could see what she sees, would also find ourselves holding to things less tightly. Our food and clothing, home and family, all we have—these are gifts. We can learn to share them, just as the poor widow does. That's the second piece of this story.

Giving Freely, Out Of Love

The third is found in another easy-to-overlook detail. This widow has two coins. That's important. It means that she has a choice. She doesn't have to put in everything. If she had one coin, it would be all or nothing, but with two coins, she could hold back if she

chose. She would be giving half of what she has—way more than a tithe! No one would think the less of her; indeed, most would see her as a model of giving if she gave half of what she had. But she puts it all in, “all she has to live on”—literally, the Greek here says, “her whole life.” And she does it freely.

Ferrol Sams is a physician who, until his retirement, practiced medicine in his hometown. He is also a fine short story writer, and one of his best is entitled, aptly enough, “The Widow’s Mite.” It’s about a young, rather disadvantaged woman whose husband dies in a freak accident. They had bought a life insurance policy, and because of his accidental death, she will end up collecting \$125,000. Now this young woman is a devout Southern Baptist, who has always been taught to tithe. When she sees the preacher coming to call one day, she knows just what he wants, and she’s ready for him. She is, she tells him, certainly going to tithe that \$125,000. But before she figures God’s 10%, there are a few calculations that have to be done. First of all, it was a double indemnity policy, the amount doubled because of her husband’s accidental death. She had no intention of buying that much insurance, so certainly God didn’t expect her to tithe the full amount. The amount she had paid for the policy needed to be subtracted; after all, she had already tithed on that money. On and on she goes, elaborately subtracting various things and regularly informing the increasingly glum preacher what the bottom line is now. It comes down to the fact that she doesn’t really owe God more than a few dollars. “Whatever,” the sullen preacher says, and gets up to leave. “Now just a minute,” she replies. She takes out her pocketbook and gives him a check for \$12,500. “But this isn’t my tithe,” she says. “It’s a free gift. And none of it is to go to expenses of the church; I want to set up a scholarship for poor children in this town to go to college.”

We never quite hear how the preacher reacts to this, but I would hope he can see the beauty of it. This woman was very clear that she didn’t *have* to give this money, there was no obligation. But she gave it nonetheless, out of love for children—and, we would suppose, out of love for God. She made her offering with joy and thanksgiving—like the

widow in Mark's story. So that's the third piece: the joy of giving comes not when we feel compelled to do it, but when we do it freely.

Signs Of God's Gracious Love

Three pieces: The personal need we Christians have to give; our recognition that all we have comes from God; and our joy in giving freely, not out of obligation but out of love. But perhaps we can put the three pieces of this vase back together and see the whole. I think one of our familiar offertory prayers is a good way to do it. Listen to the words, in the context of what we have said: "Merciful Father, we offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us, ourselves, our time and our possessions, signs of your gracious love. Receive them for the sake of him who offered himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord."