**November 11, 2018**

**Mark 12:38-44**

From the first chapters of Genesis, God refers to people as stewards. What we do with our resources – time, talents, *money* – is called stewardship. Stewards are *managers*, not owners. Managers are people who handle resources on behalf of the owner. Managers act in the interest of the owner.

Our owner is God (from whom all blessings flow). The wealth that we earn and have and save is not *ours* in any permanent sense. It passes *through* us. We may “own” our individuality, our principles and our character; they cease being on the day we die. But our money existed before we did and will continue after us. Time existed before we did. Land existed before us. Other people and relationships and service existed before us. These greater gifts pass through us. We manage them while we’re here; we do not own them. That's why we are stewards and what we do with the gifts/resources we have is “stewardship”. We are managing them with God’s best interests at heart.

Somewhere within us, our calculating minds are asking, "Well, how much of what we manage can *we* keep? How much are we supposed to give?" Though that's the wrong question, for that's thinking like an owner, not a steward. That question creates the impression that we are owners who can choose to give or not to give, but we are managers.

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus and his friends were at the temple in Jerusalem. They saw the rich and famous hanging around in their fine clothes, making ostentatious gifts to the temple treasury. Jesus was profoundly unimpressed and warned his friends of people who behaved that way. Then as he was speaking, an elderly woman identified as a poor widow, came and quietly deposited two small coins (“mites”) in the treasury. In his praise of her generosity, he introduced the concept of proportional giving – the idea that our gifts to God are not valued by their cost or raw buying power, but by their portion of the giver’s total assets. The poor woman was praised for giving all she had (even though it wasn’t worth much money), while the rich and famous were condemned for giving small portions of their great wealth (even though their gifts were worth more than the widow’s).

Sometimes people read this story as a celebration of smallness. We pat her on the back for having soooo little and giving something (or giving her everything). We look at her tiny gift and we marvel at what God can do with that little bit. We say the same thing when we hear the mustard seed story and think that the point is to have just a little bit of faith. Not so! This story is about a big thing. The widow gave all she had – 100%! The point was that she did not give a portion – she didn’t give 2% or 10% or another generous percentage by today’s standard; she gave all that she had. She returned to God what God had given her. Her everything.

Too often we think about the minimum we can give to God, or about the minimum we can do to be Christ’s disciple. Could we love our neighbor just once in a while and satisfy Jesus’ expectations? Is it enough to send one card to someone grieving, thereby fulfilling the “love your neighbor” chore for the rest of the year? Can we leave a few dollars in the offering plate and satisfy God’s call to generosity? (especially if that offering is meant to cover us for the *whole* week or month…) While these are the questions we often ask, this is not the kind of loving or giving that Jesus asks of us. These questions are proof that we are missing the point. Loving and giving are both verbs and adjectives. This is how God intended us to live each and every day, each and every week, each and every year; these words should be our continuous state of being.

Have you heard the old joke about a $20 bill and a $1 bill who meet in a bar?? The one dollar asks the twenty dollars what he’s been up to lately. “All sorts of stuff,” says the twenty. “I’ve been to concerts, nice restaurants, malls, and really nice vacations. I’ve seen some great movies and had a lot of fun. How about you? Where have you been lately?” “Same place all the time,” says the dollar. “Church, church, church.”

This is not just a story about stewardship. It is also a reminder to Christ’s followers of our everyday job description. It demands we take a long hard look at ourselves and ask: are we building ourselves up, making ourselves feel good, or are we lifting up the least among us? Are we a gift of God for the people of God, or are we merely supporting an institution that is a gift to *us*? We were not transformed by God’s grace just so we *alone* might be changed; we are transformed by God’s grace and given innumerable gifts so that we might demonstrate a different way of being to the world. We are transformed to proclaim God’s gifts to every one of God’s children. We are called not just to *think* about caring for those in need, but to actually provide what they need. We are called to honor the poor, oppressed, lonely, wanting, and waiting, by listening to them, by being with them, by befriending them, and by working with them (not over them or around them, but with them) to change the world. If the church isn’t doing that, Jesus seems to warn the disciples that every pledge we dedicate next Sunday and every dollar we collect in offerings will rob the widow of her final two pennies.

The widow gave all that she had to an institution that should have been caring for her. What would it look like if our church gave all that we had to caring for Long Island? What would it look like if we gave our last two cents to help our neighbors eat and work and live healthy lives? If we emptied our savings to support the hunger ministries we occasionally engage? What would it look like if we gave all that we had to care for God’s creation on Long Island – cleaning up the local waters, putting solar panels on our property, investing in energy-efficient lighting and heating? It *would* require spending all that we had. And if we did, we could accomplish great things. But then what would *we* do? We have bills to pay. We need that money for our own plans.

In an attempt to celebrate the generosity and kindness in the world, Ellen Degeneres partnered with Cheerios cereal to encourage her fans to achieve “One Million Acts of Good”. Ellen has celebrated hundreds of ordinary people doing kind and generous things with their regular resources: single moms feeding hungry neighbors with their minimal savings, preschoolers organizing lemonade stands to help friends with serious illnesses. One public school teacher donated a kidney to her student’s mother. Another New Jersey principal bought washing machines for his school because students didn’t have access to clean laundry at home. These people are not wearing fancy clothes or earning extra privileges. They are using all of their mites to love God and love neighbor. They are using their strength to support the weak and lift up the brokenhearted.

Who are the other widows in the world? Those entrapped in a cash bail system, the underemployed, migrants in that great southern caravan, those who can’t afford proper healthcare, Syrian Christians, the mentally ill, opioid addicts… We step over these people and on top of them when it suits us. It’s not as though *we* are the scribes or temple leaders, strutting around with lots of power and wealth. It’s more like we are the disciples, bumbling around on the sidelines, wanting to do good, but mostly just watching opportunities for service and generosity and faithfulness pass us by. We *could* give more. We *could* do more, but it would take too much time, too much energy, too much money. It’s much easier if we ignore the widow and leave the system as it is. But that is not good enough for Jesus. Over and over he said in the gospel of Mark, “Don’t be like the disciples. Don’t be like the scribes. Be like the widow. Be like the children.”

Earlier in this same chapter of Mark, Jesus said that the most important thing to do in following God was to “Love God and love our neighbor with our whole heart and mind and soul strength.” The best thing we can do is to love God with our whole selves – our time, our money, our talents, our interests – these are the tools we have in fulfilling God’s commandments. Our generosity in sharing these gifts is a measure of our faithfulness, and our stewardship season is an opportunity for you to hold yourself accountable. What has God given to you this last year? What have you returned to God – in time and talent and offerings and service? What have you kept for yourself? After receiving our individual pledges, our church officers decide what we can do and give as a congregation. It is always my prayer that Sweet Hollow will be able to increase our mission giving and participation, but we cannot do so without our congregation members’ individual acts of generosity. Our budget should reflect a desire to serve God’s purpose in the world, not just enable our own survival for another year. How can we, as a church, return more to God? How can we use less for ourselves?

Prayerfully consider the widow’s generosity, and the stewardship God grants us. May we faithfully, humbly, joyfully return to God all that God has given us. And in doing so, let us continue to trust that God will care for us. As Jesus said in the Gospel of Matthew, “Do not worry about what you will eat or what you will drink or what you will wear… God knows what you need. Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” Let us then trust in the future God has prepared for us, and let us faithfully live in such a way to make it so. Amen.