

“CHOICES: II - WHAT WILL YOU GIVE?”

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Mark 12:38-44

Well, it happened to me again. Not long ago, I was talking to somebody and mentioned that this week I would be preaching about stewardship, and he said, “Ugh! I’ll bet you hate that!” This is, by far, not the first time someone had said that to me. Everyone seems to assume that a pastor having to take on the issue of giving is something they would rather not do. But for me, at least, nothing could be further from the truth!

This is one of my favorite Sundays of the year, and stewardship season, when we’re looking forward to making our financial commitment for the coming year, is one of my favorite times of the year. Why? Because I get to offer an invitation to joy and blessing! I get to offer an invitation for you to be a part of Christ’s great adventure in the world! I get to offer an invitation for you to help change lives! No, I don’t hate this time of year - I love it!

You know, I think that’s why Jesus, in this morning’s Gospel lesson, was so moved by the widow who gave all that she had to the offering. I think he saw deep within her joy. Oh, on the outside, it appeared that she had nothing going for her. All anyone could see from looking on her appearance was that she was alone, and poor, and dependent on others for her future. In that day and age, being a widow was a bad thing, a really bad thing. You were totally vulnerable. You had nothing to call your own, and you had to, literally, depend on others to keep you alive.

So, looking at her, that’s what the average person would think. “Oh, you poor widow woman, only two coins to your name, you, poor, poor woman!”

But not Jesus. He looked beyond the outward appearance, and saw her heart. He saw a heart that said, “no matter what life has thrown my way, no matter that I am all alone, no matter how I’ll make it or if I’ll make it, God has blessed me, and I want to give all I have to God.” Jesus saw her heart - her heart of love and joy and generosity, and He was overwhelmed by it. Indeed, He was blessed by her giving.

And remember, He saw her right after He had said some pretty harsh words about the “religious” people - the scribes. He had seen their heart too, and it wasn’t a pretty sight. They were more concerned about being “seen,” and being

respected, given the best of everything, and flouting their “religiousness.” Jesus saw their hearts and what he saw was self-centeredness, emptiness, coldness. Jesus saw the widow’s heart - and saw generosity, joy and trust.

You see, that woman got it. She got that everything she had in life was a gift from God, and she was giving back to the God who had so generously given to her. The scribes didn’t get it - it wasn’t about God for them, it was about **them** for them.

What is it for you? Is it about God or is it about you? That’s the fundamental question that has to be answered when it comes to our giving. Do you believe that everything you have is a gift from God, or do you believe that it’s all your’s? How you answer that question will make a difference in how you give.

One sixth-grade Sunday School teacher once helped her students understand that in a very real way. She had a whole bunch of stickers printed that said “This belongs to Jesus.” Then she handed them out to her students and told them to put one on everything they had, and she did the same thing herself. What she hoped it would do, and which it did, by the way, was help the kids see everything as a gift from God, and then help them use everything in a way that was pleasing to God. She was especially moved herself, when she put one of those “this belongs to Jesus” stickers on her calendar, because suddenly she began to find herself making decisions about the use of her time and talents in a more thoughtful way. “What am I doing with my time that is a gift from the Lord?”

That widow knew that all she had was from the Lord, and so she gave back to God freely and fully, what He had given to her. You know, I always hoped she got to see what happened because of her offering. I always hoped that she got to see how her money helped Jesus’ work in the world - how her money fed the hungry, clothed the naked, built the church.

One pastor has likened giving to a bird building a nest. He said that came to him once when he was watching a mother bird build a nest, and he realized that she wasn’t building it for herself, she was building it for her babies. You know, in much the same way, those who came before us built a nest for us here in this church.

Bishop Robert Schnase put it this way: “Every sanctuary and chapel in which we have worshiped, every church organ that has lifted our spirits, every pew where we have sat, every communion rail where we have knelt, every hymnal from which we have sung, every church classroom where we have gathered with our friends, every church kitchen that has prepared our meals, every church camp cabin where we have slept - all are fruit of someone’s extravagant generosity.”

He continues: “We have been the recipients of grace upon grace. We are the heirs, the beneficiaries of those who have come before us who were touched by the generosity of Christ enough to give graciously so that we could experience the truth of Christ for ourselves. We owe the same to generations to come (he says). We have worshiped in sanctuaries we did not build, so to us falls that privilege of building sanctuaries where we shall never worship.” (Robert Schnase, *Practicing Extravagant Generosity*, p. 72)

Did you hear that? We give graciously so that someone can experience the truth of Christ for himself or herself. I hope that widow got to see how her giving helped someone know Christ for himself or herself. And, likewise, I hope that you have seen how your giving has helped make that happen around here.

You know, because I’m right here in the midst of everything at church, I see it all the time. But I wonder if you know - really know - how much your giving matters? I wonder if you know how many people have come to know Christ this year because of your giving, and how very many lives have been touched and changed because of you.

Do you know that because of your generous giving everyone of our classrooms, including all those new classrooms we built in the Wesley Wing, are filled with people studying God’s word and drawing closer to Christ? Everyone of them.

And do you know that even our classrooms weren’t enough space to hold those who were hungry to learn more about Jesus, so we took our studies outside the church several times this year? Over 60 people gathered in four different locations outside the church this summer to study together how to be stronger Christians with John Ortberg’s book, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You’ve Got to Get Out of the Boat!*”

And this fall again, almost 30 others have been in off-campus studies of Adam Hamilton’s book called *Enough* which is about contentment and simplicity and giving.

Your giving made those studies - and all of the studies in our church possible. Your giving paid staff salaries and the staff of our church has worked incredibly hard to help others grow in Christ in so many ways. Brett has been instrumental in helping the men’s ministries grow; Shannon has done incredible things with children’s and educational ministries, Sandy continues to lead youth to Christ in so many ways, Bill has kept the bills paid, Kay has been more than just the church secretary, she practically keeps this place running (or at least she keeps me straight!), Donny has kept it clean, Paul leads our fabulous handbell choir,

Yolanda and Mary Ann have watched over our children in the nursery, and all you have to do is look over there at Sharon and Steve and see what a tremendous impact they have both had on our church. I don't know where we're going to put more choir members as it continues to grow!

Your giving supports the work of the staff as they work to help others grow closer to Christ and use the gifts that God has given them.

Your giving this year has helped the Trustees keep our building a place that is safe and clean and a hospitable setting for people to come and know Jesus. I hope you read their reports in the newsletter, because if you haven't, you don't know that your giving has made a changeover from oil heat to gas possible this year. It has fixed leaks, repaired ceilings and floors, renovated and renewed our church. None of it would have happened without your giving.

Oh, there's so much more. I haven't even started on missions and outreach. You gave and we sent care packages to our college students. You gave and we took over 200 bags of groceries over to Immaculate Conception for their food pantry to feed those in need. You gave and we filled nearly 30 book bags with school supplies for families who are struggling. You gave and we staffed two full weeks of the Rotating Winter Shelter. You gave and we sponsored children through Compassion International. You gave and we turned over nearly \$10,500 to the United Methodist Committee on Relief for the One Great Hour of Sharing. You baked and you baked and you baked and helped the United Methodist Women have a phenomenal Cookie Walk. You gave and we offered our Joy of Faith celebration at Elkton High School where 600 people turned out to have their spirits lifted by Taylor Mason!

I could go on and on for a month of Sundays telling you how your giving this year made a difference. It has been an incredible year, and what is perhaps most incredible, is that, in this year of a struggling economy, where lots of people here are struggling as well, your pledges for this year of 2012 were 21% higher than the pledges for 2011. That's what you have done - and hasn't it been a joy to do that! Isn't it exciting to be a part of God's great adventure in the world?

Two weeks from now, you will have the opportunity to write down your commitment to Christ through this Church for 2013. I invite you to spend these two weeks in prayer, remembering that everything you have is a gift from God, and asking God to guide you as you decide what you will give back to Him. I invite you to make this a journey of joy - not to look at it as "what can I spare for Jesus?" Think about the lives that will be changed by your giving, and how you can help this church continue to be, as our mission statement says, "a place where people come to know Jesus, be known by Jesus, and make Him known to others."

As you move into these two weeks of prayer and contemplation, I want to close by sharing with you just a few more, very personal stories of lives changed because of all of you working hand in hand with Jesus through your giving.

For the first one, I only need to say three names - Patty, Brett and Carlos. Patty Frick, Brett Pinder and Carlos Reyes. The United Methodist Church has been blessed because these three people have answered God's call upon their lives to full-time ministry. And you were there at the beginning. For Patty, it was a Disciple Bible study that drew her closer to God. For Brett, I think it was our youth group. For Carlos, I think it's been so many things - he could tell you. The friendships here, Sunday School, the Men's Retreat - so many things. And oh, if you heard him last week, you know that he will touch many lives with God's love in very special ways for years to come. Patty, Brett and Carlos - God's messengers in the world, who heard their call in the ministries in this place - made possible by your faithful giving.

Secondly, I want to say a word about something that happened here earlier this week. It was the funeral service for Samantha Vinc, the 14 year old girl from Bo Manor High School, who was killed in a car accident. As you might imagine, the funeral was packed. Frank Deibert and I figured there were probably 500 people here - in here, all along the walls, in the chapel, and the hallway downstairs. They were devastated by Samantha's death, and needed a place to celebrate her life, and we were that place.

Samantha was not a part of our church, and as far as I know, doesn't have any relatives here. But we offered our space because it is one of the largest churches around, and our church members turned out to help - in the parking lot, in the kitchen, as greeters, furniture movers, in so many ways. Because of your giving, we're able to do things like that. We have a beautiful, big parking lot, we have a renovated Weldin Hall, we have the staff to help out, and we have so many people to lend a helping hand to those in deep grief. In so many ways on Monday, for the Vinc family and the Bo Manor family, we were the Body of Christ, and things like that could not happen, were it not for your faithful giving.

Finally, I want to share something that happened to me. A couple of years ago, we had an Advent Workshop where children and their parents were invited to come and make Christmas ornaments and such. There were stations set up all over Weldin Hall to make different ornaments, and the place was filled with kids running all over the place trying to make them all. I was sitting at one of the tables watching them, when a little tiny boy with big brown eyes came up to me with an ornament in his hand, and he handed it to me and said, "I made this for you!"

Imagine that! He made it for me. When everyone else was adding things to their own collections, he made it for me. I was so blessed by him and his gift, and I

won't ever forget it.

Imagine friends, that, in two weeks, when you make your pledge to Christ through this church for 2013, you're saying to Him, "I made this for you!" what it would mean - to Him and to all who come to know Christ here in this place.

May those words be on our hearts and in our minds as we accept the invitation to give - an invitation to joy, an invitation to be a part of a great adventure with Jesus. "Lord, I make this pledge for you!" May it be so.

Amen.