

Mark 12:38-44

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Samantha Evans

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All That We Have

Among my earliest memories of money, are those which bring instant anxiety and those which bring a sense of pride.

My anxious memories are around lunch money or money to eat out with my friends. I worried that I wouldn't have enough or my parents wouldn't be able to give me any money at all.

And then there are the moments of pride which came from doing the dishes and getting a few dollars in allowance, or when I started earning my own money at my first job at age 16 as a lifeguard.

Growing up, the only other place I remember dealing with money was in the church. My mom would send me to church on Sundays with two dollars. One for the Sunday school offering and one for the worship offering.

And to be honest, I don't remember ever learning about why we gave money or where the money went, it was just something we did. I will say, though, that it always felt good to contribute. It felt good to give something valuable. It may have only a couple of dollars, but hey, that was lunch money. It was significant to me and it felt good to give it away.

As I look back on this, I think the most obvious reason why it felt so good was that I was really invested in my church. It was a place where I felt unconditional belonging. There were people there who loved me, who taught and nurtured me.

My friends were there. We had good food there. It was just a place where I liked to be and so even if I wasn't knowledgeable about how my dollars made it all possible, it felt good to take those dollars and use them as a tangible sign of my commitment and investment in that place.

Money is complicated, and it is taboo to discuss. Which I always find ironic, since we literally all have to deal with money. It's the ever-present elephant in the room. So, if you hear nothing else today, I hope that you hear this: it does matter if you give two dollars or two million dollars. It's the reason behind the giving that matters.

In this text from Mark, Jesus describes the community of faith at the temple in Jerusalem. He talks about the scribes and the folks who give large amounts of money, but he tells his disciples to be wary of them.

And then he draws their attention to the widow who gives two small copper coins, just a penny, which was the smallest unit of currency in Rome. Jesus brings our attention to this widow, the lowliest member of the temple, because she has given the greatest gift of all of them. Not because of the amount, but because of the intention behind her gift.

The rich gave so that they could be honored and distinguished within the community, but the widow gave everything that she had. The text says that she gave all that she had to live on. But the better translation is that the widow offered her entire life. All that she had, all that she was, she offered, not to the temple, but to God.

She gave out of a place of hope and faith that God was at work in her midst, that God would take care of her. That God would work through her offering to bring about God's love and justice on earth for her and for all.

This widow models deep faith and trust in God, and this story reveals to us that the amount of money we give will never be correlative to the distinction or honor we receive in this community or in the kin-dom of God.

Our gifts do not bring us perks or priority seating. They have no bearing on our place in this community of faith.

Whether we give a lot, a little, or frankly none at all. In this place, and in the kin-dom of God, we are all welcome. We are all honored and distinguished guests in this house of God simply because God has named us so.

The beauty in this is that because we are already assured that we are honored guests, our offerings can come not from a place of obligation or guilt, but from a place of gratitude. Our offerings can be seen as hopeful responses to the freely given love of God. We give not to appease God or make up for real or perceived failures. We give because God first gave to us.

This foundational trust is what may enable us to be like the widow. To give freely and generously, trusting in the faithfulness and promises of God, trusting that we can give all that we are because God is at work in our midst.

We can give from a place of hope and faith. And our gifts can be a tangible sign of our commitment and investment in what God is doing here in this place.

Now let me be very clear here: I don't think God calls us to give every last penny we have to the church. Every time I read this story, I can't get over the tragedy of this widow giving everything she has to live on to an institution that isn't going to take care of her at all.

So I think the gospel writer intentionally creates this tension to make a point about discipleship and faith in God. Jesus instructs his listeners not to give everything they have to institutions, but to give everything they have to God. For God desires us to offer our entire selves, everything we have and everything we are, to God.

I have a dear friend, colleague and mentor, a retired pastor of 40 years, who once told me that he worked his entire life to achieve a true tithe, where he gave 10% of his overall income to God.

He shared with me that he believes that the intention behind working towards a tithe is just as important as reaching it. And that is because the whole purpose of the tithe is that it is meant to serve as a representation of the whole. In Scripture, God's people are asked to give to God the first 10% of their income as a representation of the entirety, not just of their income, but of their entire lives.

I have taken this to heart. I am working towards that 10%, and it will probably take me my whole life to get there, but it feels faithful to stretch myself and my budget every year.

Because like the widow, I deeply desire to offer my whole self to God. I seek to trust that God will always be with me, will always provide enough for me, will always be at work around and within me.

And I know, that since I am human, full of faults and contradictions and fears, I will probably need to work my entire life to fully trust God in this way.

And the grace is that that's okay.

For our God is faithful and consistent and patient. And because our God loves Creation and loves us so deeply and fully, we can rest assured that no matter what we do, no matter what amount we offer, God will invite us day after day to rest in the faithfulness and the promises of God.

Even if it takes our whole lives to be able to trust God enough to freely give all that we have and all that we are, to God, our God will love us and welcome us and care for us still.

And so, my dear friends, today, as we consider and pray and offer our financial pledges for 2022, let us seek to offer our full selves from a place of trust and hope. Let us seek to believe that God is faithful to us, that God is at work among us, and that no matter what, we belong here as God's beautiful and beloved children.

For truly all that we are and all that we have belongs to God. Hallelujah and amen!