

BE A RECKLESS CHRISTIAN!

(11/26/17)

Scripture Lesson: Mark 12:38-44

“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)

A few months ago, in our reflection on the biblical account of Jesus’ confrontation with the rich young man, I mentioned that this would be a great lesson for Stewardship Sunday. The passage is a reminder of the dangers of our attachment to material wealth and how grasping can cut us off from the spiritual journey. The passage combines the theme of a person earnestly searching to discover the kingdom of God with the theme of Jesus’ call to discipleship, a call that involves letting go of outer security to find true inner freedom.

This is indeed a great stewardship theme, for we are like the rich young man. First, we are rich, at least compared to the majority of people in the world. Second, we want to experience the kingdom of God; we want to find eternal life; we want to be saved, or we wouldn’t be here this morning. Third, like the rich young man, *most* of us here this morning have led upright and moral lives. Like him we need to extricate ourselves from the creeping materialism that threatens to engulf our nation and also our souls. In terms of stewardship, we need to think about how we can spend \$60 dollars in a restaurant and not feel a twinge of conscience when we place \$5 in the collection plate.

The account of Jesus’ confrontation with the rich young man would indeed have been a great passage of scripture for us to consider on Stewardship Sunday. But we are not going to talk about that this morning. We are going to consider another passage: the account of the widow’s offering.

This morning’s scripture lesson paints a simple scene. A woman who is in poverty gives all that she has as an offering to the temple. Jesus sees what she has done and praises her gift.

The woman is a widow. Without a husband she has no visible means of support. She also has no legal, religious, or social status. She is essentially invisible in the eyes of her society.

We may complain that we are living on a fixed income, which means our annual income is not rising or it may not be indexed to inflation. This woman has it worse. She is more than disadvantaged by poverty; she is destitute. The penny she gives is described as “her whole living.”

This is a great example of what I would call reckless giving! The woman gives away her “whole living.” She doesn’t give away 10% of her net income, which would be the biblically proscribed tithe, or even a half-tithe. She doesn’t give what is left over at the end of the month after she has paid her bills. She gives everything she has: “her whole living.” Note that she does what the rich young man cannot do.

As this encounter takes place, Jesus knows he has a limited amount of time left with his disciples. He wants to teach them a lesson. He wants to teach them a lesson about giving. He wants to teach them a lesson about discipleship. He wants to teach them a lesson about life. If this is one of his final teachings, one of the final spiritual truths he wishes to transmit to his disciples, it must be an important lesson.

Jesus tells his disciples to observe the gifts that are placed in the temple treasury. The gifts that are offered by rich people are impressive. Jesus does not demean these gifts. He knows we each give of our wealth; we share our abundance. We give as our heart dictates.

The disciples would naturally notice the biggest givers. We do the same. In most churches, 10% of the members usually account for 50% of the amount pledged. I think this is probably true of our church.

Jesus directs his disciples’ gaze toward the widow. He tells them to watch and listen as the offerings are deposited into the metal offering container. Despite the commotion of the temple court, Jesus hears the offering that the woman places in the container. How could Jesus hear this? Jesus’ ears must have been keenly attuned if he heard the falling of two small coins. Perhaps it is a reminder that nothing escapes the notice of God “from whom no secrets are hid.” As my coffee mug puts it, God tells us “I saw that!”

Jesus is not impressed by the size of the gift, nor does he become technical about percentages. We stress percentages in our stewardship campaign. We encourage you to tithe, to give 10% of your annual income to the church. There are probably few churches where if all the members gave a tithe or even a half tithe, the pledged income would not double or triple. Percentages are important measures or guidelines for giving, but Jesus does not talk percentages.

Jesus tells his disciples that the gift is judged on the basis of what it means to the giver. The heart, the feeling, the motivation behind the gift is of great spiritual significance. This is why the widow’s gift is so meaningful. She gives everything she has. She literally gives away

her next meal. This is a tremendous act of trust! The woman is what I would call “a reckless giver!”

In the sight of people, the widow’s gift is worth little. In the eyes of God, who looks on the heart, her gift is immense. Jesus tells us to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength. The widow has fulfilled this commandment. She holds back nothing. She is a reminder that no gift of love is too small.

We New Englanders tend to be fiscally conservative. We are concerned about our 401K’s, our retirement plans, our social security benefits. There is nothing wrong with this. It is called being prudent. If we were to start a building campaign in this church, we would want to know if we would be able to raise the money that would be needed to see the project through to completion. Not to do this would be foolish.

And yet . . . Jesus calls us to step outside our comfort zone. He tells us to break the mold in our giving. Instead of being careful, calculated, and measured, he tells us to be impulsive. He calls us to undertake building projects in faith. He tells us to trust that if what we are trying to do is the will of God, it will prosper. He calls us to be passionate, even reckless and extravagant in our giving!

There is an element of trust involved in this kind of giving. It is the kind of trust that the widow has but the rich young man does not have. The rich young man is careful and measured in his giving. He reckons the cost of discipleship, probably to the very last penny. The woman is reckless, extravagant, and passionate in her giving. She is not doing this out of the belief that if she will give all that she has, she will receive more in return. She gives because this is what her heart moves her to do.

In this example, in this teaching, Jesus challenges us to be a little more reckless as Christians. He calls us to be a little more impulsive, a little more trusting. He calls us to experience the joy of passionate, reckless living!

As many of you know, because of a powerful dream that I had many years ago, I have a special connection with and devotion to Francis of Assisi, who lived in the thirteenth century in Italy. He is my favorite saint. I have been to Assisi several times, just to be where Francis was.

Francis grew up as a rich, spoiled young man. He was superficial, materialistic, egocentric, and pleasure seeking. When he was young, he would go riding with his companions, those companions with whom he drank and caroused most evenings.

One day Francis is out riding on his magnificent stallion when he comes across a leper. The leper is dirty and smelly with rotting flesh. He is an outcast, of a very different social status from Francis. Lepers had to ring a bell as they walked. As they rang the bell, they would shout out the warning, "Unclean!" This would alert people to their presence so people could avoid them. If I had to do that every day of my life, I would eventually come to think of myself not as someone who has Hansen's disease, but as someone who was unclean, as a despicable human being, as one who was cursed by God.

Francis' biographer describes him as being exceptionally fastidious in his habits. He was compulsively clean and adverse to unpleasant odors. This makes his next act both surprising and shocking. When Francis comes upon the leper, he suddenly, unexpectedly feels an urge that he has never felt before. He climbs down from his horse, goes up to the leper, and embraces him. He takes the leper's decayed hand and kisses it. Then he takes off his magnificent cloak and wraps it about the man's shoulders.

This is a reckless and extravagant act, a reckless and extravagant gift! It is not that Francis gave away great wealth, at least not right then. A short time later, he gives away all his inheritance and embraces poverty as the way of life that Christ lived, a way of life that he believed Christ called us to live. We are startled not by the size of Francis' gift, but by the recklessness of his act. It is totally out of character for him to do this.

When Francis mounts his horse to return to his friends, he looks over his shoulder for one last glimpse of the man whom he had so unexpectedly embraced. The man is gone. He has disappeared. He is nowhere to be seen.

Many years later, Francis spoke of this encounter as a test. He believed that God had tested him to see what was really important in his life. He said that God had probably tested him many times in many different ways in the past, but he had not recognized these tests and he had not passed them. Francis considered this reckless, foolish, extravagant act the first test that he had ever passed. It was a test that would transform his life, and through his life make a tremendous impact on the spiritual values of the church and western civilization.

Let's go back to the widow. Why did she give her last penny to the church? We don't know. Perhaps there was no reason. Perhaps it was done on impulse. It is unlikely her underlying motive was grounded in deliberate reasoning because the act was so unreasonable. It

was reckless. Yet of all the offerings that are placed in the temple treasury, this is the one that Jesus holds up to his disciples as a lesson about stewardship, about discipleship, and about life.

Our pledge has spiritual significance. It is an act of worship. Stewardship is a duty, a responsibility, but it is one we should carry with joy. No one is excused from the grace and duty of giving. Even as Jesus knows both the amount of the woman's offering and the spirit which gives rise to it, he knows what we give and what we withhold, not only from the church but also from those whom we love and from life.

Let us, in this stewardship season, become just a little less measured. Let us become just a little less calculating, prudent, and careful. As we fill out our pledge cards for the coming year, I pray that, like St. Francis, like the poor widow, we will be touched by the joy of reckless giving!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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