

GIVING

Ruth 3:1-5; 2:13-17; Mark 11:38-44

When you go to the doctor for a checkup, he or she will poke and prod, pressing various places, all the while asking, "Does this hurt? How about this?" If you cry out in pain, one of two things happens. Either the doctor has pushed too hard, without the right sensitivity. Or, more likely, there's something wrong, and the doctor will say, "We'd better run some more tests. It's not supposed to hurt THERE!" So it is when pastors preach on financial responsibility, and certain members cry out in discomfort, criticizing the message and the messenger. Either the pastor has pushed too hard, or perhaps there's something wrong. In that case, I say, "My friend, we are in need of the Great Physician because it's not supposed to hurt THERE!

I trust that today's message will not be too painful for most of you, as we look at the scripture passage that is before us and giving, stewardship of our time, our talents and our resources.

Without doubt, most of you are familiar with the passage of scripture read this morning from the Gospel according to Mark. Undoubtedly, you have heard this read about this time in previous years, as churches move into the Stewardship Season that many churches conduct, asking members to pledge their resources to the glory of God so that Finance committees can craft a budget for the coming year that utilizes the money to the maximum benefit of the congregation and to the glory of God. However, I would like for us to take a critical look at this familiar passage, perhaps pressing a little.

Many theologians have questioned this passage by asking two (2) questions: Does Jesus point to the poor widow who gives her last two coins to the temple as a model for giving? Or does Jesus point to her because she is a tragic example of how religious institutions suck the life out of people? In the very next passage Jesus declares of the temple, "Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." Jesus gives a warning about the scribes, who are in part responsible for the operation of the Jerusalem temple, making it clear that Jesus condemns them for devouring widow's houses. This whole religious apparatus has become perverted. Its leaders lead privileged lives. It no longer protects widows, the poor, or the vulnerable of the earth. It lives off them instead.

And, what if Jesus is indeed, holding this widow up as a model for giving? What do we do about this one key detail? Jesus calls his disciples to notice that she gives all she has - literally, "the whole of her life." She gives her whole life to something that is corrupt and condemned. This is the last scene in Jesus' public ministry. From here Jesus will enter into Mark's telling of the passion narrative. So, this widow offers a glimpse into what Jesus is about. This widow foretells the next steps for Jesus as he is on his way to giving the whole of his life for the corrupt and condemned: all of humanity, the whole world, you and me.

You know, it is not easy to find the right words to speak about the stewardship of money. And though Jesus speaks directly and often about the dangers of allowing money to take the place of God in our lives, people of faith often find such words difficult and awkward. On the one hand, thoughtful Christians want to be known as kind and generous people; on the other hand, becoming such a person is not exactly second nature to many of us. For this reason, I believe, Jesus takes an opportunity in the passage before us to point out an unlikely person--a poor widow--as an example of what God values most in the stewardship of our money. I want to suggest that what Jesus values in this woman are a ***Genuine Heart, a Grateful Spirit, and a Generous Attitude.***

Jesus and his disciples were in the temple area near the treasury. From their vantage point, they could see what people were putting into the offering plates. Some of the wealthy folks were putting in large sums of money. Surprisingly, these large sums and the people giving them did not impress Jesus at all. Then along comes this poor widow, who catches the attention of Jesus. The poor widow gives, first of all, from *A Genuine Heart*.

In the previous verses, Jesus had a debate about paying taxes to the emperor, about which commandments are the most important, and about how certain laws related to marriage can be interpreted in unusual circumstances. The debate was not engaged from a genuine heart for learning more of God's ways with people, but more as a way of discrediting Jesus. The religious leaders were seeking to catch Jesus in a theological trap. Of course Jesus saw through their questions. He answered each question without getting caught in the trap, amazing the religious leaders. And Jesus Turned to the disciples, condemning the way they use their positions of influence to their advantage, like getting the best seats in the house in the synagogue and the seats of honor at banquets. In essence, he is saying that their hearts contain the wrong motives--they are out to make themselves look good in the sight of others--first and foremost!

And then, by contrast, Jesus sees the poor widow and says, "That's what I'm after!" Her motives are pure. She clearly gives out of a genuine heart for God. Although her gift is meager in comparison to the large sums given by the wealthy, it is by far the greater gift, because it comes from her heart. I want to suggest that the place to begin in our giving is to examine our hearts. Do we desire to give God the very best that we have, from all that we have? "

In one church I served, a woman named Lydia joined our church. She had come to the US from Kenya. She told me that she loved our congregation, but she really missed certain aspects of her home church, especially parts of the worship service. I asked her what she missed the most, and she told me something I've never forgotten. She said, "I miss the offering. In Kenya, we would sometimes dance down the aisles during the offering. We didn't have much to give, but what we did have we gave with much joy. What a privilege to give back to God!" she said. Ever since that conversation, I try to make the offering more than just a routine part of the worship service. I try to link the offering of our gifts with the attitude of our hearts. As God has given so much to us, especially in and through his son Jesus Christ, surely we can give back to God from glad and joyful hearts! For Lydia and for the woman in this story, giving an offering to God is first and foremost a matter of having a genuine heart for God.

During this season of stewardship in many of our churches, let us remember that God cares more about our heart than the actual amount of the money we give.

Something else is at work in this poor widow that Mark talks about. For her to give such an extravagant gift, she must be giving from *A Grateful Spirit*. Her gratitude is unspoken, but it is clearly her motivation in giving. Why else would one give so much from the little she had?

Dr. Michael McCullough is a psychologist and the editor of the book *The Psychology of Gratitude*. In a recent interview on public radio, McCullough said that scientific research reveals what many of us have been taught by our grandmothers all along--taking time daily to be grateful for the blessings in our lives--leads to a higher degree of satisfaction and sense of well-being. McCullough says: "*Your*

grandmother was right. When people are encouraged to take a few moments, every day, even as little time as two or three minutes a day, to simply appreciate a few positive things that typically somebody else did for us, you end up feeling better at the end of the day about your life in general. He says, "We see boosts in positive emotion. We see reductions in negative emotion. People are more satisfied with their lives as a whole....They even sleep better at night! They are more prone to spiritual pursuits.

I love it when the scientific research backs up what the Bible has said all along. The Psalmist says in Psalm 100: "Enter God's gates with thanksgiving!" The Apostle Paul says: "Give thanks in all things." (I Thess. 5:18). Jesus encourages daily thanksgiving in the Lord's Prayer: "Give us this day our daily bread." (Matt. 6:11). A grateful heart is a foundation of an emotionally and spiritually healthy life. Taking time each and every day to count our many blessings can change a "negative Nelly" into a "positive Polly."

You can bet that the woman in this story has a grateful spirit for God's blessings in her life. Jesus affirms her because she is giving for all the right reasons--**a genuine heart for God and a grateful spirit**. And there's one more thing going on. The woman's **genuine heart for God and grateful spirit** motivate her to give with A **Generous Attitude**. Her gift is clearly the most generous of all--not in the amount of the gift but in the sacrifice behind it. Jesus says, "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."

Let us pray: Loving and gracious God, thank you for the many blessings that you pour out upon us. Help us to remember these blessings each and every day of our lives. As we give our financial gifts to you, may we give as did the woman in this story. May our gifts be pleasing to you and may they accomplish your purpose in the world. In Jesus' name. Amen.