

Giving Out of Our Poverty

Commitment Sunday

Mark 12:38-44 2 Corinthians 9:6-12
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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November 4, 2018

I'm not a big fan of using the term Stewardship Campaign, and even less, Stewardship Season. Yes, this is the time each year when our Session presents a proposed budget for the coming year. And yes, this is the time each year when we ask you to make a financial pledge toward that budget. And yes again, that's just how Presbyterians go about it each year, as opposed to passing the plate around enough times each Sunday to pay the bills. But let's face it, do we really want to use the word 'campaign' in this day and age? The political campaigns of two years ago, as well as the current ones – by the way, please vote this coming Tuesday – almost make my gag reflex kick into high gear when I hear the word 'campaign' today.

But like I also mentioned, even less than the term stewardship campaign, **I dislike the notion of a stewardship season. Good stewardship is a way of daily life – every day of the year.** It doesn't just come and go because the leaves are turning color and falling from the trees. True, the Finance & Stewardship ministry team may not talk about turning in your Pledge Card but at this time each year, but think about how many sermon messages, Moments for Mission, and 5th Sunday Offerings you have heard *throughout* the year about the opportunities to contribute some of your time, talents, and resources to the work and ministry of this congregation. How many times have you heard a message from this pulpit about the constant need to put our faith into action? That's stewardship! And that's something we focus on much more than during one brief season or campaign during the year. And no, I'm not just reminding us of all this simply to take pressure off myself for needing to deliver the most inspiring sermon ever to get you to pledge to the church.

Last Sunday's sermon, "What Does Blind Bartimaeus Have to Do with Stewardship?" involved a fairly intense Bible study concerning among other things the meaning of his name, and how the story of Jesus' response to the blind beggar, Bartimaeus, informs how we, as individuals and as a community of faith, should use our time, talents, and financial resources to respond to the needs of others, including ourselves, and most certainly to those on the fringe of society. I was going to do the same intense Bible study with today's Gospel Reading, the fairly familiar story of the poor widow who contributed everything she had to the temple treasury. That's what I've done in the past when I preached a sermon on this story. For as you might image, there's way more to this story than meets the eye at a surface level. Instead, today I want to simply keep it on eye level and repeat Jesus' response to his disciples.

They watched as the crowd threw their money into the temple treasury. Historians say money was collected in a large cone-shaped bin made out of metal. The volume of the noise of clanging coins would announce to all around how much someone had contributed. And yes, **many rich people put in large sums of money. Jesus comments, however, that they gave only out of their abundance, their excess,**

what they could spare giving up without any real sacrifice. But the poor widow only threw in two small copper coins, worth about a penny. Jesus then comments that she contributed more than those richer than her because “she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

Many scholars today believe this story is actually a critique of the temple system itself because it expected that much sacrifice, especially of the poor. But I'm not going there today. Instead, I was really drawn this week to that phrase about **giving out of one's poverty. What do you think that means? And who actually benefits?** Did the temple treasury benefit from the equivalent of one penny? No, not really. Did the woman who literally gave it her all benefit? At one level, we are led to believe in this story that she did. So, **taken out of the context of a possible historical criticism of an unjust, corrupt, and abusive religious temple system, this story can help us reflect upon what it would mean for us to give it our all.** And I think that can be extended to life itself, not just to contributing to the church. What transpires in this story is **the poor widow becomes a model, almost a metaphor, for complete commitment.**

That certainly ties back into the theme of this Sunday, our yearly Commitment Sunday. Let's be honest, any church, including this one, thrives (let alone survives) only out of the commitment and dedication of its members and friends to contribute what they can, when they can. So, how does anyone in this day and age get motivated to give and give generously? It has long-been my assertion that **true commitment – to God and to the church, or basically to anything or anyone – flows primarily out of a deep sense of gratitude and thankfulness.** In other words, there is no deep commitment where there is not first gratitude. For how can we truly commit ourselves to anyone or anything if we are not first grateful for that person or cause or organization? Why would we even want to commit our valuable time, our talents and abilities, let alone our financial resources, to anything for which we were not grateful, unless it was under the stress of compulsion or the guilt of an expected obligation? Remember the words of the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 9:7, **“Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”**

In a spiritual and religious context, that involves our commitment out of deep gratitude for the grace of God working in and through our lives, and for the life of the community of faith to which we choose to belong. Again, **it is only out of a sense of genuine gratitude – not duty or fear or compulsion – that we choose to truly commit ourselves.** I suspect this is what ultimately leads us to commit ourselves to following the ways and teachings of Jesus.

And on this Commitment Sunday, I don't want to miss the opportunity to express my genuine gratitude to each of you and to this community of faith. I am deeply grateful for all the time, talents, and financial resources that together we commit to the life and ministry of this remarkable congregation – and to the glory of God. Thank you!

Amen.