

“The Grace of Giving” (Stewardship 2)

Mark 12:41-44

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Our Canadian group had just arrived in Kenya’s Masai lands on our Foodgrains Bank Study Tour. Near the Najile Presbyterian Church we put up our two tents in complete darkness – no electricity for miles. I was soon having my first experience of a “squatty potty” by flashlight (aka. an outhouse where it looks like someone has stolen the toilet because all that’s there is a little hole in the middle of the floor). With this initiation experience behind me, I emerged to take in the beautiful night sky and the very different stars you see at the equator. As I lay down in my sleeping bag on the ground I pondered it all: camping under a starry African sky, sounds of the African Savannah... and then we heard it, a very loud “Maa” and then again and again. A pen full of goats was about 50 feet from our tent. But my three fellow Canadian tentmates, all farmers, were not about to let a billy goat disturb their sleep. They sprang from our tent, duct tape in hand, and quickly muzzled the noisy creature.

On the morning of our departure I discovered that the crowded pen of goats and cows, and the nearby barn full of grain had a deeper significance: “We give our tithe (a tenth of our income) in grain or animals,” a church member said, “and when someone is in need we take from it to help others and when we need to pay our minister we sell some of the livestock or grain.” The pen and barn contained the “living” offerings of Masai Presbyterians.

The Masai mostly live in mud huts; their food supply is entirely at the mercy of climate change – which seems to bring either extreme drought or torrential rain. Yet still, people who live with so little give so joyfully a tenth of their income to God. As one Masai woman says: “It’s a joy to be able to give to the living God.”

Those could have been the words of the poor bent widow in today’s Gospel Story who walks up to the offering plate—puts her whole trust in God—and flings in the very last two coins she has. Instead of holding on tightly, she surrenders everything to God. Hasn’t she heard of tithing? She throws in every last cent! Jesus calls over his disciples to point out this poor widow. Although lots of rich people have made large contributions -Jesus says “she has given more. While all the others gave what they’ll never miss, she gave extravagantly, what she couldn’t afford—she gave her all. What could have motivated this woman? Have you ever seen anyone give with such abandon as this poor bent widow?

A knock came to my study door one day. Startled, I wheeled around to answer it and discovered a dishevelled, unshaven young man with dirty unkept clothes.

“Are you the reverend of this here church,” he asked.

“Yes,” I answered extending my hand, “I’m Tim Archibald.”

“Hi, my name’s Earl,” he said. “My girlfriend and I were here in church a few Sundays ago,” he continued. “She’s a real believer. That Sunday when the offering plate was passed she put in all our money, \$1000 in cash—everything we had to live on for the month. I said to her, Couldn’t we just keep a little bit? ‘No,’ she said, ‘it’s all for God.’ And she put it all in the plate...she’s crazy!”

When the plate was passed, she cracked open her purse and threw in everything. The more you realize that Jesus loves you, the easier such trust becomes. Generosity's loose grip makes it **easy** to give things away.

For some the offering is an unwanted intrusion into our worship, but for those who trust Jesus it is both a privilege and a wonderful joy—for it yokes our faith to our jobs, our daily cares and concerns, what we shall eat, what we will wear, where we live and how we vote. The offering is the link, the necessary connection between our intentions and our deeds. A Christian does in church on Sunday that which he or she does Monday through Saturday in the world—surrendering one’s life to God. Our actions, our gifts, our money, our deeds are our offering, our way of giving back to God who has generously given to us; our way of participating in the work of God’s coming kingdom and of affirming that we are loved to love, blessed to be a blessing.

Scripture teaches the importance of generosity over and over again. Think of the top five virtues in the Bible: love, justice, mercy, kindness and compassion. Love is mentioned in Scripture over 700 times, justice is mentioned over 600 times. If you total the references to all five of these virtues in Scripture they appear about 1500 times. But guess how many times the words give and gave are mentioned in the Bible—1864 times; more than all those five top virtues put together. Generosity is what we were made for; and the test of generosity is whether giving things away for you is easy and enjoyable. All the others gave what they’d never miss, but the Jerusalem widow gave extravagantly what she couldn’t afford—she gave her all.

And thus, with the crazy faith of this bent, old, poor woman, Jesus’ public ministry in Mark’s Gospel comes to an end. This widow’s story is the prelude to the most life-changing and extravagant offering of all time—when for you and I, Jesus walks to

Calvary and on the cross throws in his whole life so that your sin and mine can be taken away—so that you and I can experience the amazing grace that is going to one day heal and save our world. George Morrison says: It is the genius of love to give. It is love's way to forget self and lavish everything. And being love's way, it is God's way too. How Jesus loves us.

Bob Leverenz understood the connection between faith and generosity. Back in the middle 1980s, the Allen-Edmonds Shoe Company had a catastrophe. Their factory burned to the ground, causing them to lose everything. They lost 50,000 pairs of shoes, sales records, machinery, files, everything. It threatened to destroy their whole business, leaving hundreds unemployed. In the midst of their struggle to figure out what to do, Bob Leverenz, president and chairman of the Leverenz Shoe Company in Wisconsin, threw them a life preserver. He called the president of Allen-Edmonds and offered him the use of their New Holstein factory until they could rebuild their factory.

His plan was that his own company would work four ten-hour days from Monday through Thursday, letting Allen-Edmonds use the plant from Friday through Sunday. This radical plan captured the attention of the media throughout the US. Reporters from all over the country interviewed Leverenz. The one question they asked was "Shouldn't you be dancing with glee over the demise of a major competitor, rather than extending a helping hand?" Bob Leverenz would have nothing to do with that kind of thinking because his way of thinking had changed deeply a decade earlier.

Back in the early 1970s, Bob Leverenz had gone to a conference in Miami where he heard Leighton Ford, a lieutenant of Billy Graham. Ford had challenged the business leaders to renew their commitment to Christ in the workplace, seeking what God wanted, not what people or convention wanted. Leverenz came back from that conference determined to commit himself to serving Christ in all of life. He read Romans 3:27-28, which says that we can do nothing to merit salvation, but that salvation has already been given to us as a gift. Reading this changed his life. He realized that he had been going about it all wrong. He had been trying to get into heaven by doing good things like going to church each Sunday, teaching Sunday school, and raising money for charity. They were rooted in self-preservation, not in Christ. He was trying to merit his own salvation. He realized that salvation was a gift given in love by Christ, and he needed to live his life sharing that gift of God's love with others. This change in his understanding of what it means to be a Christian changed the way he managed his company.

You can see why reaching out to the Allen-Edmonds Shoe company was not a hard decision. It was a decision that emerged out of prayer, and the result was that both the

Leverenz and the Allen-Edmond companies emerged as healthier companies (story adapted from “The Vote Was Unanimous,” found in Chicken Soup for the Christian Soul).

So if today when the plate is passed, your heart breaks open in love for the God who has given all for you—and you just let go and throw in everything—your whole self – then you are on the way to discovering in Christ the life that’s really life! Just try it—I dare you. For our need to give is far greater than the church’s need to receive.