

A HEART FOR GOD

Text: Mark 12:38-44

Today's lesson is really two separate stories, but they are tied together with one of the core messages of the Gospel. These stories are a lesson in contrasts.

Our first story puts the focus on the scribes, posturing and promenading in their flowing robes; those who ostentatiously strut into the temple to place large sums of money into the treasury. These are the ones who take financial advantage of the most fragile members of the community. These scribes, who were supposed to earn their own living, would and could demand hospitality beyond the biblical limitations of a day or two. Wealthy widows were especially vulnerable and poor widows – well, they were vulnerable as well.

And it is about the poor widows that Jesus has a few condemning words to say. Not condemning to the widows, but to those scribes whom he has just brought to our attention. I believe that Jesus wants us to see what motivates giving, how our values are represented in what we give and how we give, and perhaps even what our philosophy of giving says about our faith.

I would like to suggest that Jesus values three things, which he exemplifies in the unnamed widow in our story. Jesus values a *Genuine Heart*, a *Grateful Spirit*, and a *Generous Attitude*.

So, let's start with a *Genuine Heart*. The poor widow gives, first of all, from a genuine heart. In the previous verses, Jesus finds himself in a debate with the religious leaders, who engage him in arguments 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 is 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 are always out to catch Jesus in a theological trap.

Of course, Jesus sees through their questions to their true motives. He answers each question without getting caught in the trap. The religious leaders are truly amazed at him. So Jesus turns to his disciples and points out the way that these same religious leaders like to be seen in their long robes—it's an impressive display of their authority. He condemns 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!

In contrast to them, 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 greatest gift, because it comes from her heart.

I would 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?

Something else is at work in this woman. 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 an interview on public radio, McCullough says the scientific research reveals what many of us were taught by our grandmothers – taking time each day 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. We see boosts in positive emotion. We see reductions in negative emotions. People are more satisfied with their lives as a whole...They even sleep better at night! They are more prone to spiritual pursuits.*"

There is no doubt 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 in this story. The woman's genuine heart for God and her 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".

Generosity is defined as "the quality of being kind and understanding, and not selfish". A genuinely generous heart is anchored in the love of God. God pours God's love in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, giving us the ability to be truly generous. A generous heart is a lifestyle that permeates every area of our lives; freely we have received and freely we give.

Generosity is giving from the heart; it is giving of ourselves through our demonstration of love, compassion and kindness. It is more than our material possessions; it involves sharing our God-given gifts and talents. So we need to become intentional in our giving or we might miss opportunities to be generous.

Generosity has a way of multiplying itself, doesn't it? Jesus points to the poor widow to both challenge and inspire his followers to likewise give with a generous heart. Of course, we here today are thinking about our budget for 2019 and the Leap of Faith that we always include so that we can meet our own responsibilities and provide some outreach to our neighbors in need. But if we reduce the widow's giving to our giving to the church, we have missed the point of this story entirely.

This widow embodies Jesus' own ministry. Jesus will have to give his whole life, his entire life. He already did, in fact, prior to the cross. He constantly embraced rejection. He consistently accepted the questioning of his followers. He confirmed over and over again that following him would mean whole life giving and

whole life living. The widow's example should be nothing new and at the same time should be everything new.

She embodies Jesus' own ministry. She acts out Jesus' own call. She believes that what she does will manifest itself in something beyond herself. In the end, that is true discipleship. That, according to Mark, is the essence of God.

It is amazing to me that God can take what seems to us like a small gift, and when it is given for all the right reasons – from a genuine heart for God, with a grateful spirit, and a generous attitude – multiply it many times over.

I would like to add that there are three other aspects of giving that each one of us needs to have. They are: Joy. And Joy. And a little more Joy. Yes, giving is serious business but it's also a sign of life. And our lives, for the most part, should be expressions of joy. Joy must be at the core of why we give because all the gifts we have – time, talents, and treasure – are to be returned to the One who has given us life. It's that humbling and thrilling all at the same time. Yet, if we do not have a *Genuine Heart*, a *Grateful Spirit*, and a *Generous Attitude*, we will never find our *Joy* in community, communion and connection. When we have a heart for God, joy will follow. Amen.

