

Proportion

Dr. D. William McIvor

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Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Mark 12.38-44 (NRSV)

As he taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, “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.”

Introduction

Most churches I’m aware of do their stewardship emphasis about this time of year. I don’t know if that fact influenced the compilers of the lectionary to assign this gospel text to the second Sunday of November. But we can surely understand why preachers would grab this text for stewardship sermons even if it’s not in the lectionary. But a lot of preachers misinterpret this text and end up saying that we must be like the widow and give everything we have to the Lord.

But we all know that we’re not going to give all that we have. Yes, the widow gave all that she had but she only had two coins worth a penny. We have a lot more and not only will we not give it all but it is impossible to give all that we have.

I don’t think Jesus is telling us to literally give every penny we have. Yes, he says the widow is an example for us. But her example was about giving in proportion to her love for God. So that’s what I want to talk about with you. How do we give in proportion to our love for God?

The text talks about great giving and two kinds of people. Jesus said watch out for one kind of person and be like the other kind of person. He said watch out for the scribes. These were the religious leaders of the day. They were Bible experts. They were pillars in the community. They were respected for their generosity. Jesus said it was all for show. They thought they gave much but really gave nothing at all. Don’t be like the scribes.

Be like the poor widow, Jesus said. She had nothing. No respect or honor or anyone to care for her. She probably didn’t act very religious. Eking out an existence wouldn’t leave much time for religious things. After watching her, the text says Jesus “called his disciples.” That phrase is a clue in Mark for us to pay attention. The widow was a great giver. Be like that, said Jesus.

I wonder if the Presbyterian Church in Sudbury can be, will be, a church of great givers? Let’s ponder that as we consider a couple of ideas about great giving. First, great giving is forgiving.

ONE: Great giving is forgiving

That may seem strange to you. Neither the word nor the idea of forgiveness is anywhere stated in the text. Whatever this scripture is about doesn’t seem to be about forgiveness. But consider this.

You may have heard some version of the old, somewhat sick story of two business partners named Albert and Neil. Neil was in the hospital, dying from some unknown illness and Albert went to visit him. Suddenly the dying man said, “Albert, before I go I must confess some things to you and ask your forgiveness. I know I’m about to die. I want you to know that I robbed the firm of \$100,000. I sold our secret formula to our competitors. And, Albert, I am also the one who supplied your wife with the evidence that helped her get a divorce from you and that cost you a bundle.”

Albert said, “That’s okay, Neil. I forgive you. I also have something to confess to you before you die. I’m the guy who has been poisoning you.”

Most of us treat forgiveness that way. As something we do for the other person and, therefore, we use it as a way to get even, or to control or dominate another person. We usually speak of forgiveness as something we do for someone else. We say to another, “I forgive you” and think that is something we have done for or to another person. Now they are forgiven. They have had something done to them.

But if you look up the word *forgive* in the Oxford English Dictionary you will discover that forgiveness has less to do with someone else than it does with ourselves. To forgive really means to give up what rightfully belongs to us. To forgive is to let go of our hurt, our revenge, what we own, or what is rightfully ours. To forgive is to change ourselves, not the other person. The most important thing about forgiving is what happens inside us. This is why in the Lord’s Prayer, we ask God to “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”

Some of you will remember the story of Corrie ten Boom. She was a Christian woman from Holland who suffered much in Nazi concentration camps because she and her family had hidden Jews and others from being discovered by the Gestapo. After the war she told her story in speeches, sermons, and in books like *Tramp for the Lord* and *The Hiding Place*, which was also made into a movie.

One night long after the war Corrie met face to face one of the most cruel and heartless of the German guards who had brutalized many in the Ravensbrück concentration camp. He humiliated her and her sister, among other things, leering and jeering at them as they stood naked in the delousing shower. Years later, after Corrie spoke one evening at a conference, this man came up to her and explained that he had been a guard at Ravensbrück. He didn’t remember her but oh, how she remembered him. And he stood before her, holding out his hand and said, “I am a Christian now. Will you forgive me?”

Corrie wrote, “I stood there with coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion ... [it] is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. ‘Jesus, help me!’ I prayed.... [And] woodenly, mechanically I thrust out my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. ‘I forgive you, brother!’ I cried. ‘With my whole heart.’” She said never had she so intensely known the love of God as in that moment.¹

Corrie had every right to put her hurt and anger first. But she put first the needs of another person. To forgive is to set the prisoner free and discover the prisoner was our self. Forgiveness gives up the self as priority one and puts the other person first. What bothered Jesus about the scribes was,

¹ Corrie ten Boom, *Tramp for the Lord* (New York: Jove Books, 1978) 55.

for all their showy religion, their main concern was to gain attention for themselves. What attracted Jesus to the poor widow was that she put herself second by giving everything she had. She could have been angry at the Temple authorities for they were, by Jewish law, supposed to care of widows and the poor. But she did not put herself first. She gave all she had because great giving is forgiving.

TWO: Great giving is forever

Great giving is also forever. Great giving is forgiving and it is forever. I mean by this that what we give may be the thing we most have. What we give is what we have forever.

During our vacation in Seattle this past August, Merrie and I took a couple of days and drove over to Spokane on the eastern side of Washington. The church I served before coming to Sudbury is located in Spokane and it is also the home of Merrie's and my alma mater, Whitworth College. Well, actually now it is Whitworth University but in the good ol' days it was still Whitworth College. And while we were in Spokane we spent some time with two of our best friends who also graduated with us from Whitworth.

Whitworth didn't have fraternities or sororities, but its residence halls had certain personalities and reputations. So Westminster was the jock dorm. The best looking girls tended to live in McMillan or Ballard halls. Goodsell-Lancaster was known as the Zoo and the men who lived there had a well deserved reputation for gross and semi-inappropriate behavior.

So where did my buddies and I live? Well, we were Carlson Men. The residents of Carlson Hall had a reputation of being a little strange and kind of off in a world by ourselves. Maybe that's because a high percentage of Carlson residents planned to go to seminary. So we were the so-called "pre-sem" dormitory.

Carlson men may have been a bunch of geeky pre-sem types but we decided to be the dominant force in intramural sports which were a really big deal on campus back then. So we were intramural football champions three of my four years, volleyball champions four years in a row, and softball champions twice. My friends and I still remember how great we were.

But, of course, nobody on campus today even remembers us let alone those "achievements." Our victories are only fading memories. Those moments of glory do not last.

I'll tell you what has lasted though. What has lasted is what I gave. That is, what I gave of my energy and time and money, the things I gave of myself have lasted, for good or bad, in the character I have today. How I used what I had then — time, energy, money — have only lasted in who I am. For good or bad, what I gave of myself then has lasted in me. That's the frightful thing about what we give. Giving is forever. That to which we give ourselves lasts in us and in what we influence. It's frightening to think that Jesus could look at me and say, "You're just like a scribe. Everything you've given has been for yourself." How wonderful it would be if Jesus could look and say, "You are like a poor widow, putting others first and giving everything she had." Great giving is forever.

Conclusion

My friends, I think we are all somewhere between the scribe and the widow. It doesn't do any good to look around and say I'm further ahead than him and I'm way ahead of her. That's not the point. We are not measured by each other's giving. We are only measured by the giving of ourselves. We give in proportion to who we are and what we have and our love for God. That's why I love preaching about stewardship. I love to preach about giving because this is the best way to talk about

who we really are and who we are becoming. Is our giving of time and energy and money in proportion to our love for Jesus Christ? We are all somewhere between the scribe and the widow. It is not so important where we are. It is terribly important which way we're going and how fast we're getting there.

Is the Presbyterian Church in Sudbury heading towards being a church of great givers? I hope so. And I'll end today with a delightful Jewish story about why God decided to build his Temple in Jerusalem.

Two brothers were partners in a grinding mill in Jerusalem. At the end of each day, they took the grain they had milled and divided it equally into separate sacks. One night the bachelor brother thought, "This is not right. I am alone and don't need much, but my brother has a wife and family. He deserves the larger share." So, sneaking back to the mill each night, he took part of his share and poured it into his brother's sack.

The married brother also thought one night, "This is not right. When I am old, I will have children to support me, but my brother will be all alone. He deserves the larger share." So, sneaking back to the mill each night, he took part of his share and poured it into his brother's sack.

They thought it a miracle to find their sacks refilled each morning.

One night, however, the brothers left home at the same time to sneak back to the mill, and by coincidence, met on the streets with their sacks in hand. Instantly, they knew what was happening and fell into each other's arms weeping for joy.

God looked down upon the scene and said, "Here is where love meets. Here I will build my Temple."

If we are a church of great givers, then everything we do here with our money, energy, and time will be where love meets. Our lives will be in proportion. We will put others first and God will build a temple here and in our hearts.