



**“Faith and Generosity”**

Sermon Preached by Anne R. Ledbetter

November 8, 2009

Scripture – Mark 12: 38-44

I will just explain to you up front: in my sermon preparation this week I have been hearing voices. No, I have not heard God’s voice, but I strongly suspect that God is speaking to me through these other voices. Before you decide that the heavy schedule or additional pressure (with Greg’s absence) has been getting to me, let me tell you what I’ve heard, and maybe you will be able to discern their voices too.

The first voice rises from our scripture passage and from other gospel texts. It is the voice of **Jesus**. As he tells his disciples, “Truly, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury,” I hear Jesus saying “proportional giving matters.” Those scribes may have given the 10% tithe set out in the Torah, or their hefty offering may have only represented 3% of their wealth, but whatever the sum, it paled in comparison to the two coins, barely 1 cent, given by the poor widow. For “out of her poverty she has given all she had.” Jesus sees this woman’s faith – her knowledge of her utter dependence on God – and how she gives all she has, completely to God. On the other hand, Jesus notices how the scribes flaunt their so-called faith, by making a huge production of their large gift which comprises a pittance of their wealth. As he looks at the woman, I hear Jesus repeating one of his many aphorisms, or wise sayings, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”<sup>1</sup> This woman’s treasure has just been given to God, who is at the core of her heart; yet most of the scribes’ treasure remains invested in themselves and their lavish lifestyles. Jesus is essentially telling us that our stewardship, our pledge, our giving reflect the depth of our faith. The deeper our faith, the greater will be our generosity.

Another voice I heard this week was that of **Jane Bryant Quinn**, financial writer and investment guru. In the last month or so I have been listening in my car to a book on CD by Quinn entitled *Smart and Simple Financial Strategies for Busy People*. Encouraging her listeners, or readers, to be wise with their resources, Quinn preaches “decide how much you want to save – 3%, 5%, 10%, and put it away as soon as you get your paycheck. You’ll be amazed how you suddenly find that you have enough to live on.” Jane Bryant Quinn’s suggestion to take savings out at the beginning of each month, echoes the request of God to return the first fruits of our labor – that is, to take our gift to God off the top of our earnings each month, and not wait to see what’s left over. In other words, I would wager that Quinn’s advice would work the same with setting aside

a particular percentage for God – that “we would be amazed how we can live on less than we think.”

As I think about a 10% tithe, or a more modest goal in pledging to the church, I remember words of former Westminster pastor **Jon Walton**. I still hear the final sentence Jon offered at the end of a sermon he once preached on this passage from Mark. He concluded saying, “The question, you see, is not ‘how much will we give to God, but how much will we keep for ourselves?’” The very word stewardship reminds us that all life is gift. As stewards we are simply managers. What we have does not belong to us, and we have it for a short time. What we do with our gifts is a reflection of our faith and an opportunity to witness to God’s generosity. All we have comes from God. How much do we need to keep for ourselves? And how much can we contribute to the building of God’s realm of shalom in the world?

I believe I have also heard **the widow** herself this week, or a more contemporary representative of her. When I worked part-time at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Austin, Texas, Frank, a pastoral colleague, one day told me excitedly about a remarkable experience he’d had leading a worship at a local nursing home. Each month Frank and some church volunteers routinely led a service consisting of a few prayers, a few hymns, a scripture reading, and a brief homily. This health facility was full of people with little or no means – all Medicaid recipients – and none of them members of Westminster Church in Austin. As Frank was speaking to residents after the service, one Hispanic woman in a wheelchair called out to him, “Pastor, pastor!” When he approached her, she grabbed his hand, pressed something in his palm, smiled up to him with tears in her eyes and said, “Eglésia! Eglésia!” Frank had no doubt he had encountered an angel messenger from God. He looked me in the eye and exclaimed, “She gave me a quarter, Anne. Like the widow, it was all she had, and she gave it eagerly and joyfully to the church.” Thanks to this friend, I can still hear this woman today, rejoicing in God’s goodness and her opportunity to give: Eglésia! Eglésia!

Mark offers few details in this story. We do not know whether the widow was young or old. [We only know that she was poor, as were all widows in Hebrew society. Without a man’s protection and support, they were dependent on the support of the community of faith.] We do not know whether she was crying or dejected, happy or sad, but I picture her as joyful – having a heart full of gratitude and trust in God. Perhaps this image stems from two other voices rattling around in my brain – the first one is **my mother** repeating to me the words of Jesus, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”<sup>ii</sup> As a child I noticed that my mother derived more pleasure at Christmas from watching others open their gifts than opening her own. I could not understand how she enjoyed giving more than getting, but over the years I have come to feel the same way: giving at Christmas evokes more joy than receiving. Perhaps it is a sign of age, or possibly a maturing spirit. The widow was certainly blessed – or happy – in her giving. The second voice which prompts me to see this widow as glowing with joy, is that of **the apostle Paul** who wrote to the church in Corinth, “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”<sup>iii</sup> Praising the widow and her gift, Jesus implies that the scribes gave out of duty with the hope of recognition and esteem, while the widow gave out of gratitude buoyed by her joy in having the opportunity to give at all.

Do you know anyone who seems ecstatic when it is time for the offering plate to be passed? Or someone who cannot wait to send in her pledge card? In my last church in Texas, Covenant Presbyterian in Austin, an older woman spoke on stewardship on one of my first Sundays there. **Milly** was alive with the Spirit, and basically witnessed to a conversion experience in her life. She was a lifelong Christian, and had recently attended a workshop on the ministry of money. She returned saying, “I am a new person! I have had an epiphany regarding my finances. I have discovered the true joy in giving to God!” Her joy was infectious and contagious to us sitting in the pews— so much so that I decided I had to meet this woman. I had imagined that she was a wealthy person who had finally found motivation for becoming more philanthropic, but what I found was a recently retired divorcee on a fixed income, who had felt the tightness of her scarcity mindset liberated by God, her faith deepened through generous giving. Tithing produced endorphins in Milly’s soul, like a 10K race would promote in a runner.

And this leads me to the last voice I heard this week. It was the voice of my friend and colleague **Chad Miller** – whom we all continue to miss and mourn. Sometime last year, as we pastors would lament the struggle with stewardship in our current culture, I recall Chad declaring with passion, “What I give to God is essential to my faith. When I’m feeling spiritually disconnected, I immediately look at my giving, my checkbook or bank statement. Tithing keeps my priorities in life in order, and is critical to my spiritual health.”

You see friends, generosity is a fruit of God’s spirit, and a barometer of one’s faith. They go hand in hand. Giving generously affirms that all we have comes from God, and that we have a responsibility to create a climate of justice, compassion, love and peace. Giving generously deepens our faith and produces joy in our lives. Generosity becomes our trademark as Christians.

A week from tomorrow I will be going to New Orleans with eleven other Westminster members to build houses through Habitat for Humanity. This will be our church’s 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> mission trip there since Katrina. My brother Lee, a resident of New Orleans, and not a regular church-goer, has repeatedly told me, “You know Anne, it’s the churches, the faith communities, who have remembered us. They are the ones who came to gut and clean out the houses, and who have continued to return and rebuild.” Generosity is a characteristic of the people of God.

Okay, I’ve shared with you the voices reverberating in my mind this week. Now, based on these voices I’ve heard, you may believe I need more rest or that I should see a doctor. Or, perhaps you are like me, and believe that you too hear the Spirit of God calling us to deeper trust, stronger faith, greater generosity, and fuller joy.

Let us pray:

Take our lives, dear Lord, and let them be consecrated to Thee.

Take our silver and our gold, not a mite would we withhold.

Take our love, Lord and let us pour at your feet its treasure store.

Take our lives and let us be, ever, only, all for Thee, ever, only, all for Thee.<sup>iv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew 6:21

<sup>ii</sup> Acts 20:35

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<sup>iii</sup> II Corinthians 9:7

<sup>iv</sup> Adapted from Hymn #391, "Take My Life" in *Presbyterian Hymnal*