

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin
October 20, 2019

**Consider Carefully Your Ways:
Someone is Watching Your Giving
Mark 12:41-44**

⁴¹ Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. ⁴² But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents.

⁴³ Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. ⁴⁴ They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on."

Since it is so close to Halloween, I'd like to tell you a scary church story.

It all happened one day during an hours-long church council meeting. An every-Sunday attender stopped by the meeting.

"I've got a check for the Friends in Need Fund here."

He handed it to the treasurer. His eyes became big saucers. "I'll have to deposit that check right away!" he thought to himself.

The treasurer handed it to the secretary. His eyes widened as well. "I'll have to write a special thank you letter for a gift that size."

The secretary handed it to the church president. He hardly even glanced at it. "Is this a tithe of your income?" the president asked.

"Yes, it is!" answered the generous every-Sunday attender.

"Why would you try to lie to God like that? Strike him down!" the president commanded the sergeant-at-arms. (Yes, in church nightmares, there are armed sergeants present in the room.)

Immediately the sergeant-at-arms struck the man down and killed him.

The president told the ushers, "Take him out and bury him in our cemetery. Make sure it is double depth."

All the councilmen were filled with fear, but the meeting continued. After three hours the generous man's wife came to the meeting. "Have you seen my husband?" she asked.

The congregation president answered, "Was the check your husband brought in 10% of your income?"

"Yes, it was," she answered.

"How could you and your husband plan to lie to God like this? Strike her down," the president commanded the sergeant-at-arms. Just then the ushers came back from burying her husband.

"Take her out and bury her on top of her husband."

All the council members and the entire congregation was filled with fear.

Whew! Aren't you glad that you aren't a member of that church?

But you are a member of that church! I changed a few of the details, but this is a real event that happened in our church—not St. Paul's, but in our Christian Church. It is recorded in Acts 5:1-11. Ananias sold a piece of property and gave a portion of it to help the poor in Jerusalem. But he made it appear that he was giving all of it.

The church president of the story is the Apostle Peter. He said:

Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God.

Our giving is not truly a secret. There is Someone who is always watching your giving. He knows your income. He knows the percentage that you give. And he is certainly making a judgment about those gifts.

In our Gospel Lesson for today, Jesus is watching what people give at the temple. He sees people bring in huge sums. But he also sees a poor widow bring in just two copper coins, a couple of pennies. Then he made a judgment. Which was the greater gift? The gift wasn't evaluated by the number of zeroes on the check. The gift and the giver were evaluated based on what Jesus knows about the heart.

And what does Jesus see in our hearts as we think about our giving?

Let's admit that certainly what he sees is greed. Paul warns in Ephesians 5:5, "For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God."

Are you an idolater? The term that we heard at a conference a week ago was "functional atheist." For example, do you sleep better knowing that God is with you? Or do you sleep best when you know God is with you, but also that you have a rainy day fund and that your retirement investments are doing well? Do we trust in our God to provide our needs, but trust especially in the power of money to provide for our needs? Can any of us say that we are free from the love of money, the idolatry of money?

The church horror story should be played out over and over again. Our God can look at our heart and see that we should be stuck down and die this very moment.

The reason it doesn't happen that way? Grace, amazing grace. The Apostle Paul said it well in 2 Corinthians 8:9, "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, for your sakes he became poor, so that you, through his poverty, might become rich."

Go back to that church meeting. The church president isn't sitting at the head of the table. Jesus is. Just when the church president says, "Strike him down!" Jesus cries out, "Stop!" Jesus quickly gets up from his seat. He takes the every-Sunday attender, that hypocritical, greedy sinner by the shoulders. He moves him to the side and he carefully stands in the exact spot that check giver did. The church president asks again. Is this 10% of your income? Jesus confesses, "No it is not. I have given my God the second best rather than the first fruits. I have been lazy in my commitment to God, taking the path of the wicked lazy servant rather than the road of generous proportionate giving. I have sought the safe level of giving rather than giving sacrificially."

At this point, all the church council men are shaking their heads. "That is not true!" But Jesus looks each of them in the eye, and he looks at each of us in the eye, and he nods to each of us, as if to say, "It is true of you, and I am taking your place."

Again the church president cries out, "Strike him down!" And justice lands on Jesus and he dies.

Take him out and bury him!

But three days later, Jesus walks back into that same church council meeting. Alive! "Touch me and see!" The judgment that fell upon us has been paid.

"You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, he became poor, so that through his poverty we might become rich."

What is amazing about the poor widow in our Gospel lesson is that she hadn't seen all this fulfilled, but she knew it was true. What motivated her to give sacrificially? It wasn't fear that God was watching. She wasn't afraid that God was looking at her income and at her heart. She was focused on her Savior. She trusted in his forgiveness. She trusted in the power of the God who promises to open his hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing (Psalm 145).

That same miracle is happening over and over again today. Last week a brother in Christ sent me this note:

Shortly before I met you, I was considering increasing my offerings substantially. I was afraid to give more offerings at first. But I took a leap of faith, and was, and continue to be blessed. The year goes by quickly. When I pause and look back at all the blessings I have received, it is hard to put in words.

What is in our hearts! That's what made the two copper coins of the widow so infinitely valuable. They were evidence of the trust that Jesus saw in her heart. That's what makes our gifts of infinite value to our Savior. He knows our income. But he also knows our heart.

This past week I have emailed back and forth with a member of our congregation that I would call the equivalent of this poor widow. She asked me tough questions about how to determine what is the appropriate response of faith when you are living on food stamps and the generosity of others. I assured her that the very fact that she is asking these questions is evidence of her love of the Savior and her trust in him.

But I was worried as I responded. Certainly she too would see herself in this poor widow. This widow put in all that she had to live on. Is that the model our present-day poor widows should follow? Is that the example I should follow? I was concerned for her, and I am concerned for you, that you may feel compelled to give more than your faith enables you to give, that you give out of compulsion.

This is where I would encourage you to read Romans 14 and 15 where Paul talks about adiaphora, things that God has neither commanded nor forbidden. The examples he used were setting aside one day as holy like the Sabbath, or devoting every day to the Lord, or choosing to eat clean or unclean food.

Right at the end of Romans 14 he wrote: "Everything that does not come from faith is sin" (Romans 14:23). As we consider what is proportionate giving for us, it is important for us also to consider if things other than a love for Christ are motivating us. Do we see someone else's example, like this poor widow, and think that I must match that generosity? So you give, but are doing so out of a feeling of compulsion. What is not from faith is sin. It may mean that we have to admit that we don't have the strength of faith at this point to give at that level? It may mean that the dollar amount is ok, but my heart needs to be recalibrated.

King David's words in 1 Chronicles 29:17 are true: "I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity."

How do you know that your offerings will pass the test? Because when Jesus watches you give your offering, he is seeing "red."

Now normally that phrase is not very positive. "To see red" means to be angry. But I want to use it in just a little different way. Peter in 1 Peter 2:5 says that we are all priests offering spiritual sacrifices to God that are acceptable through Jesus Christ. When God looks at our offerings he sees red because he is looking at them through the red blood of Christ. It is Jesus' blood that makes our offerings acceptable to our God.

And when Jesus sees our generous, sacrificial giving flowing from our trust in him, he also sees himself. In Colossians 1:29 Paul wrote: "To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me."

When we give generously, can you see Jesus looking at you and smiling? He is like a parent seeing a child trying to imitate their mother or father. Dad, mom, haven't you smiled at your child in that way? You look at them in love. That's what I mean when Jesus looks at our offerings and sees "red." He is looking at us in love. And he is seeing his power at work in us. He is seeing himself and his generosity.

Remember that poor widow that Jesus watched give her offering. She gave all she had. She was a type, a picture of Jesus. Because this is Tuesday of Holy Week. Jesus' teaching ministry was done. Soon the disciples would understand the full extent of his love as he sacrificed himself for them and for us on the cross. Soon he would give his all for us. And when we give – first fruits, proportionate, sacrificially—we give "our all" for him, how can he not smile as he sees his power at work in us? Amen.

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