

WHAT IMPRESSES GOD?

Mark 12:38-44

A man dressed in white drove around Spokane, WA in a limousine and stopped randomly to hand out money. It created quite a stir. Who was he? A rich eccentric? A wealthy person with a generous streak? A nut case? None of the above. The man in white with fists full of dollars was an employee of a local radio station involved in a publicity stunt. He was a hired hand, a paid benefactor, and not really generous.

Should that surprise us? Probably not. Occasionally, someone makes a show of their generosity, but, normally, generous persons do not call attention themselves. They prefer to work behind the scenes. They work quietly. Some give to the point of sacrifice. They are all around. Quite often they are people you'd least expect to be able to give as they do.

Ruth Trent was a humble, little old lady in my congregation in Meadville, PA. Every time I saw her she appeared clean and smelled nice but was in the same set of clothes I always saw her in. Yet when she died she left hundreds of thousands of dollars to two churches, including ours. She never let on her intentions to be so generous.

Jesus warned the disciples to beware of people who make a show of their virtues. *“Watch out for scribes who are greedy and devour widows’ houses, while they make a display of their piety,”* he warned. Jews held the Torah in highest regard. The scribes who interpreted and applied the Torah were important and duly honored. Unfortunately, however, places of honor tend to attract dishonorable

people. Religion is not exempt from this problem. Lust for power and greed can be particularly hurtful on religious endeavors. The naiveté and simple trust of many of the faithful may make them susceptible to religious phonies. They do not realize what actions are taking place behind robes, prayers, and sacred texts of modern day scribes.

Jesus says such scribes will be punished severely.

James wrote: *“Not many of you should presume to be teachers...because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.”* These words apply to me and all who preach and teach. **But you must pay attention too.** This story is directed by Mark to the church, which means all of us. Mark writes, *“Calling his disciples to himself, Jesus said...”* By that Mark means the church must give attention to Jesus’ warning.

Mark follows Jesus’ warning by contrasting an event

Jesus and the disciples witnessed in the temple. They were sitting opposite the temple offering box. A number of rich people threw in substantial offerings. Presumably they attracted attention to themselves as they moved about in their stylish clothing from their front row seats. Shortly after a widow (generally a pathetic, pitied, and poor person in 1st century Palestine) slipped unnoticed to the offering box. She wanted no attention because of the meagerness of her offering, and she got no attention, except for that of Jesus. She had two **lepta**, the smallest coins in circulation. She gave them both.

There is a story about a father who was trying to teach his daughter a lesson in giving. On the way to church one Sunday, he gave his little girl a dollar and a dime. He said, “When the collection plate comes by, you can pick

your dollar or your dime to put in the plate. You may keep whichever one you do not give.” He was hoping she’d give the dollar. When the plate came by, she hesitated, then put in her dime. Afterward, her disappointed father asked how she made the decision. With innocent blue eyes she looked at her daddy and said, “The pastor said God loves a cheerful giver and I decided I’d be a lot more cheerful, if I gave my dime than if I gave my dollar.” So much for that lesson.

The widow, Jesus said, gave all that she had. Her tiny gift was worth more than all of the gifts of the others before her. The scale by which Jesus measures her gift is not sentiment, rather it is the comparison of what one has leftover for oneself. He does not criticize large gifts. Nor does he romanticize small ones. He simply states that some people after giving large gifts still have an abundance left for themselves. While the widow, after giving her gift, has nothing. Nothing except trust in God. Her gift demonstrates how much she values and trusts God. The handsome gifts of the financially comfortable are fine. But Jesus suggests they do not have the same level of the widow’s faith in God. So, her gift exceeds the gifts of all the others.

Measuring the quality of our giving involves more than counting the quantity of our dollars. The use of our money is an extension of ourselves. We can give a lot of money and little of ourselves, because we have a lot of money to give. As that famous theologian, Mae West, said, “It’s not what you’ve got that counts but how you use it.”

Calvin says this widow’s story is helpful to us in two ways: 1) The poor are encouraged by Jesus to express their love of God without concern for how meager their gift may

appear compared to those of others, and 2) Those of us with adequate means are reminded to give more than the poor, because the gift from surplus is less than the gift from shortage.

Every person's gift is valuable in the eyes of God, especially the sacrificial gift of a poor person. There is an ancient Jewish parable that tells of a poor woman who gave her offering of a small bag of flour to the priest, who scorned it. However, that night in a vision he was rebuked. "Do not despise her, because in her offering she has offered her life." The gifts of the poor are precious in the eyes of God. Sacrifice makes the gift.

Over the years the Gallup organization has conducted polls on giving trends in America. The results always reveal that Americans of low and moderate means exceed their upper-middle class counterparts in giving their money and time. In fact in many polls lower income groups seemed to be twice as generous as the wealthier groups in giving a percentage of income. In recounting this story of the widow, Mark reminds us that those of us with adequate means must be as generous as those with lesser means.

Who does this widow remind you of? How about Jesus? As an expression of love she gave her all. Jesus gave everything for us. In today's lectionary epistle reading the author of Hebrews writes:

But now Christ has appeared once for all...to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as a man is destined to die once and face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice for the kingdom of God. He did so freely. He never asks anything of us he is not willing to do and more so.

Last week we talked of Ruth who gave her love to her mother-in-law Naomi and her commitment to the God of Israel. **This week we hear of the widow** who gave her last **lepta** in the temple offering box. Both of these women reveal the quality of faith needed by disciples. They gave themselves totally to God in expressions of obedience, trust, and love. Hebrews tells of the finality of Jesus' sacrifice for the sins of the world. It need not be repeated. Hebrews reminds that Jesus will return to usher in God's new heaven and earth, where the divine and humankind will fellowship just as in the Garden of Eden. We are to anticipate Jesus' return by living in faithful obedience, like these two widows, Ruth and the unnamed widow in the temple.

The headline of *The Toronto Star* declared:

GIRL WEEPS AS JET PASSENGERS GIVE \$97,000 FOR HER SURGERY.

The article read like this:

The little girl wept as passengers on a jumbo jet raised the equivalent of \$97,000 in a mid-air collection to pay for her life-saving operation. Four-year-old Miriam Kadosh, who suffers from a serious liver condition, was flying to Britain for tests at a top London hospital. She will probably need a liver transplant. The pretty dark-haired child and her mother Tova burst out crying as the 450 passengers and crew, who heard of her plight, emptied their pockets. Everyone on board threw money into a suitcase being carried around the jet as it flew over the Mediterranean toward Heathrow

Airport. The suitcase, which was filled once, was carried around a second time to cheers and applause. Astonished crew and passengers gasped with disbelief when the collection in a dozen different currencies added up to \$97,000. The El Al flight was carrying home mainly British holidaymakers from Tel Aviv.

A sequel to the story revealed that three passengers willingly gave up their seats so the little girl, her mother, and doctor could make the flight to London.

We don't know the motivations behind the generous gifts of these anonymous people. However, we can be sure they were eager to give and did so joyously and sacrificially. And God loves them for it.

Mark's point to us this morning is we are to know that God is more impressed with the sacrifice behind our giving than the amount of our giving. God loves a cheerful giver and sacrifice makes the gift.