

“It’s the Heart, Not the Size”

Date: November 3, 2019

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Luke 21:1-4

Occasion: Extravagant giving series

Theme: Giving, stewardship, generosity

Today we continue our sermon series on extravagant generosity. Have you ever heard the term *cheerful giver*? How many cheerful givers do you know? Do you think giving away stuff – including money – creates joy? Why does it seem that when we give something out of love, we feel different, even joyful?

Think for a moment about a time when you gave money to a cause, or to a group or to a person who you believed would use it for something good. What about it gave you joy? From where did this come?

Well, that’s the kind of joy God gives us when we give with a cheerful heart, when we give not expecting anything in return, when we give to help spread the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

We grow spiritually as we begin to allow God to reorder *our* priorities to *kingdom* priorities. Giving cheerfully emerges from an attitude of gratitude, not from a spirit of fear or scarcity.

In 2 Corinthians 9:7, the Apostle Paul tells us that we should give cheerfully. Paul was writing to the well-off church of Corinth, and he lifted up the example of the poor Christians in Macedonia (2 Cor. 8) to stir the hearts of the Christians in Corinth.

In our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus defined generosity, not by the size of the gift, but by the condition of the heart from which it is given. For Jesus, motivation seemed to be everything. The story of the widow’s offering points to the condition of the heart rather than to the size of the gift.

Apparently, rich people were dropping obviously large gifts in the offering boxes in the Temple. Then, a very poor widow gave a small amount, but it was

everything she had. Jesus highlighted her gift, saying that it was greater than all the others, because it reflected the condition of her heart.

Like the widow, we are called to give humbly and discreetly, according to what we have, trusting that God knows our motivation and desire. For some, they are able to give a little; for others, they can give a lot to the church. But the size of the gift isn't the thing that matters to God; it's the person's heart.

Are they giving out of guilt? Are they giving resentfully? Are they giving out of obligation? Or, are they giving out of love for the Lord? Are they giving because they know their money will help to further God's causes? Are they giving out of gratitude? It's a matter of the heart, not the size of the gift, that matters to God.

Jesus warned the disciples to beware of practicing righteousness in front of others in order to be noticed. He said:

"Whenever you give alms or tithe, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly, I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (Matthew 6:2-4)

The same can be said for us. We are to give in secret so that our egos, which want attention and praise, can be left out of it. What's our reason for giving – to honor God, or to have people notice us? That's a matter of the heart.

Now, Jesus also encouraged generous giving. The widow's gift may not have made a big difference in the temple budget, but it made a huge difference in the life of the woman who gave it. Like the widow, we are to give according to what we have received. Jesus said:

"From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required." (Luke 12:48)

So listen, there is no room for comparison when it comes to giving. We each give different sums of money to support God's kingdom work. Some of us give larger amounts, and some of us give smaller amounts. What matters is not so much the size of the gift in terms of its impact on others, but the size of the gift in terms of its impact on the giver.

The question you need to ask yourself is this: "What is the condition of my heart?" On this All Saints Day we recognize there are some Christians whose hearts are special and who point the way for others to follow. It's not always the size of the gift, or the good deed, but the pure heart which reveals a special relationship with God.

Mother Teresa once said: "It is not how much we do, but how much love we put in the doing. It is not how much we give, but how much love we put in the giving." A story to illustrate what she is saying. It comes from Bishop Robert Schnase's book *Cultivating Fruitfulness*.

A downtown congregation in a moderately sized community had occasional transients and homeless persons who would ask for handouts. Often, street people would be found sleeping on the front steps. The staff developed rules, guidelines, and policies for how to help or how to refer those who asked for help. They had many discussions about the pros and cons of giving cash, vouchers and addresses of other social agencies.

As the pastor was leaving the church one afternoon, he noticed the part-time custodian carrying the garbage to the large trash bin in the alley. There was a homeless person sprawled out beside the bin, looking barely conscious. As the custodian approached the trash bin, he set down the garbage bag he was carrying, pulled out his wallet and removed a few dollar bills.

Without having been asked, he walked over to the homeless person and gave him the money, said something, then continued his work and returned to

the church. The pastor was amazed and humbled by this extraordinary display of generosity.

The part-time janitor who earned less than anyone else on staff gave generously without even being asked, while the staff had spent hours trying to figure out policies and procedures.

The pastor asked the custodian why he gave the money without even being asked, and also pressed him about whether he thought the homeless person might misuse the money for alcohol or drugs.

“I always do what I can,” the janitor answered. “I give them a little money and say, ‘God bless you,’ because I figure that they are some mother’s son, some father’s child, and so I give them something. What they do with the money – well, they have to answer to God about that. I just have to answer to God about what I do with mine.”

Somehow there is a connection here between All Saints Day and this idea of giving from the heart. Let us pray:

“God you are the giver of all good things. Teach us to give not out of guilt or fear or mere obligation, but out of a spirit of joy and freedom, knowing that as we learn to give of our money, we learn to give our whole lives to you. In the name of Jesus, who gave everything, we pray. Amen.”

Credits:

1. This sermon borrows heavily from *A Disciples Path* by James Harnish and Justin Larosa. Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2012, pp. 72-75.
2. *Cultivating Fruitfulness*, by Robert Schnase, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008, pp. 93-94.