

November 7, 2021

Eric Dupee

Mark 12:38-44

“The Sermon on the Amount”

I still remember the first conversation my mother had with me about giving to the church. I was in elementary school. I don't know if it was third grade or fourth grade, but I was young. She told me I needed to start thinking about how much money I was going to give to the church. It was like, “Hold on. Let me park my big wheel so I can give this 100% of my attention.”

Having anticipated the obvious objection which was the fact that I had no money, she said, “Your dad and I will give you \$.05 for every time you clean your room. So, if you clean your room every day for a week, you'll have \$.35. From that, maybe you'll decide to give five cents each week to the church.”

First of all, where she got the notion that I would possibly clean my room every day was beyond me. It was like she had never even met me before. Secondly, even at that age, a nickel each week didn't seem like much money at all. It was hard for me to imagine the church leadership doing cartwheels after receiving my one coin in the offering plate every week.

Even so, I give my mom a lot of credit for having that conversation with me. Years ago, I preached a sermon on stewardship. As I greeted people after the service, a member said, “I've been coming to this church a long time. I've never heard a pastor talk about money the way you did today.” She said, “I've heard a lot about generosity and gratitude, but I don't recall ever hearing the word *money* mentioned in worship.”

I wasn't surprised to hear that. Many of us don't like talking about financial matters. Personally, I try not to shy away from talking about it, because I've come to believe that the number one obstacle to our relationship with God is our relationship with money. For that reason, if we never talk about it, we never address one of the most important spiritual issues in our lives.

I assume that's the reason Jesus talked about what people do with their money almost as much as any other subject. In our story today, he parked himself opposite the Temple treasury and literally watched the amounts of money people contributed. That seems to indicate Jesus sees our giving as an important spiritual matter.

This morning, I want to share a few things I learned from my mom that day, things I think dovetail with today's scripture reading. First, I learned there is a financial component to my relationship with God. My mom impressed on me that my relationship with God wasn't only about worshiping on Sunday morning. It wasn't only about praying before meals or before going to bed. It wasn't just about having faith. There was an economic element to my relationship with God.

I actually believe there's an economic element to every relationship we have. There is a financial component to my relationship with you. I live in a house that the church owns and receive a salary from the church. You might appreciate and rely upon your doctor, but there's a financial element to that relationship as well. There's a financial component to the relationship

you have with your auto mechanic, with the state you live in, with the clubs you join, and with your significant other.

When I got a little older, my parents told my sister and me that if we wanted something, we needed to earn the money to pay for it. They would take care of food and clothing. We didn't have to worry about that. If we wanted money beyond that, we could mow the lawn, or shovel the driveway, or wash dishes. I internalized that message so deeply that, to this day, I feel resentful when I'm forced to spend money on clothes. The point is that without tending to the economic aspect of our relationships, they suffer. They break down.

I want to suggest there is a financial aspect of our relationship with God. An important way to tend to that component of the relationship is by treating regular giving to the church to support God's work in the world as a spiritual discipline. By doing so, our giving becomes a means of maintaining and strengthening that relationship.

The second thing I learned from my mom and that I think is reflected in today's scripture is that faithful giving is proportional. This is really the crux of the story. Jesus watched as many rich people put in large sums. They contributed out of their abundance. The poor widow only put in two coins worth a penny, but it was all she had. Jesus praised her, because proportionally, she put in more than anybody.

My mom and I both knew that contributing five cents a week to the church was not much money, but in proportion to what I was earning at the time, that wasn't too bad. There is a concept that appears in many places in the Bible referred to as tithing. That word tithe means tenth.

Apparently, the practice was to offer a tenth of one's earnings or of one's best produce or livestock to the Temple. It was a relatively simple way to determine an appropriate offering. The belief was that everything comes from God. If God gives you ten, you give back one to support the Temple.

Now, the widow in our story gave more than 10%. She gave it all. And I want to acknowledge that interpreters of this story basically fall into one of two camps. Some view the purpose of this story as lifting up the widow as an example of what loving and trusting God looks like. She was willing to give everything she had, much like Jesus gave everything he had.

Others believe the purpose of this story is to critique the way vulnerable widows were treated. In our reading today, Jesus did criticize the scribes who "devour widows' houses." Rather than focusing on the faithfulness of the widow, many see this story as a critique of a system that preys on vulnerable women.

Personally, I don't think it has to be either/or. I think we can take both lessons from this story. Now, this is not a blanket statement. There are many exceptions, but studies have shown that women tend to shoulder the bulk of the burden when it comes to caring for children, caring for aging parents, helping with schoolwork, household chores, holding everything together, often while working outside the home as well.

Evidence shows that the pandemic has only exacerbated those challenges. I say let this story be a call to recognize the systemic challenges women face day in and day out and to bring about changes. At the same time, I think we can admire the strength and faithfulness of the

widow in our story. After all, Jesus didn't stop anyone from making an offering and there is no indication in the story she was required to give those two coins.

As you know, we're inviting you to fill out a pledge card so that you can financially support the ministry here at the church in 2022. That means that all of us will need to determine an amount that we will plan to contribute. Perhaps you noticed the title of the sermon. One of the most loved sections of Matthew's Gospel is what we refer to as "The Sermon on the Mount." This is "The Sermon on the Amount." I just didn't want that to escape anyone today.

This brings me to my third and final learning from my mom. The size of the gift is not the important thing. Of course, we encourage you to grow in your giving and to stretch in what you contribute. The widow didn't hold back on her gift until such time as it was more convenient to make an offering. She didn't wait until she won the lottery before she was generous. But God recognizes the importance of the small gift.

It's so easy to overlook the small gifts we receive every day. Who appreciates the thoughtfulness of the coworker who remembers everyone's birthday? Do we appreciate teachers that stay after school to work with children who are having difficulty in class? Does it register with us when someone goes out of their way to hold the door?

Jesus noticed a person that others might have neglected. If you are one of the numerous people who contribute to this church's ministry in a way that most people don't even see, know this: God recognizes the importance of the small gift.

In advance of Gratitude Sunday, I thank you for all the big things and little things you do to make First Parish Church a launching pad for ministry.